

Becoming a Russian Doll: Interrogating Representations of
the Russian Mail Order Bride

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A Research Creation Thesis
in
The Department
of
Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 5th, 2018

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

**Becoming a Russian Doll: Interrogating Representations of
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By Alexandra Macias Lipskaia**

In the contemporary media landscape, the increasing emphasis on visual and virtual communication and narrative techniques has contributed to a heightened contestation regarding representations of foreign female bodies in the West. How is the figure of the Russian woman created and perpetuated by media technologies employed by the Russian Mail Order Bride industry? How is Western popular culture appropriating these representations in ways that reinforce the “otherness” and potential danger of the Russian Mail Order Bride? In conducting a textual analysis of visual media, academic texts and first-person experiences of women in contemporary Russia, I present a *performative storytelling* project focusing on modern Russian women’s representations in the media, and their relationship to the Russian Mail Order Bride phenomenon. I draw on the situated knowledges of women in visual media in creating a performance-based video project that develops the visual discourse of the representation of female bodies both on screen and on the page.

Keywords: Media, virtual worlds, female representation, Russian women, objectification, agency, performance, regimes of power, discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the generous support of my supervisor, teachers, colleagues, friends and family.

First and foremost I would like to extend my deepest and most sincere gratitude to my exceptional supervisor, Professor Yasmin Jiwani, without whom this work would have never seen the light of day. It was she that originally inspired me to pursue this murky subject. She was the source for its original conception, and has since been a trusted advisor, mentor and attentive guide throughout my process of making this research-creation real. Through Dr. Jiwani's generous support, encouragement, attention and guidance I was able to create an effective plan, which she and I navigated together. Only with her constant presence as both my supervisor and teacher was I able to make this project unfold in the way that I felt was most exciting and productive. Thank you, Yasmin, for believing in this work and in my ability to execute it, and for making me realize that an artistic approach to a social issue is something I could undertake as part of my academic work at the graduate level. Dr. Jiwani's critical work in the fields of intersectionality and discourse analysis have been an inspiration and greatly influenced this work, and continue to be instrumental in awakening my awareness to the importance of a mediated dialogue on the salient issues of misrepresentation, marginalization, the refugee crisis and feminism, all within the Canadian public sphere. Thank you for keeping this project on track, while inspiring me to stay curious, engaged and reminding me to enjoy the process.

I would also like to sincerely thank my second reader, Professor Mia Consalvo, in whose class I originally created the prototype for this project and tested out my ideas. I am truly grateful to have received her feedback and critical suggestions in order to flesh out the very first draft for my research-creation. I am equally grateful for the indispensable advice I received under her supervision, insofar as my methodological approach through research-creation.

As well, I want to thank Professor Angelique Wilkie, who generously became part of my committee and whose expertise in the world of the performing arts is very important to this project.

I am eternally grateful to my amazing colleagues and friends at Concordia University Television (CUTV), Amber Jackson and Brian Mann. Not only did they offer constant support throughout my MA, but they provided kind advice, practical assistance and feedback, while encouraging me throughout the many moments of my total overwhelm. As well, a big thank you to CUTV equipment manager Lara Sofia for her assistance, and our intern André Neder, who provided much needed technical support and help throughout the last stages of editing my video project. This work would not have been possible without the unique community and resources offered by CUTV. I am especially grateful to Ian Christopher Goodman and Yanis Ait who have also provided crucial creative feedback and video support.

I want to extend my gratitude to The Communications department at Concordia University, which has generously granted me a space in its MA program two years ago, and has ever since made me feel like a valued part of the community. The Media Studies program, faculty and staff provided exceptional academic guidance, teaching and resources, which have helped me learn and grow into the next part of my experience as a socially engaged, inspired and intellectually stimulated academic. To have been encouraged by my program to embark on a research-creation project, has been a really exciting way for me to apply all of my previous education and life experience, and for that I am forever grateful.

Finally, I want to thank the most important person in my life, my wonderful mother, Olga Lipskaia, for her love, advice and endless support. Mama, I love you and I dedicate this work to you and all of the Russian women that I have known to be kind, intelligent, patient and loving examples of what I aspire to become.

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PROLOGUE

Situating the Project and Situating Myself

I came to this project as a woman who has spent most of her life experiencing the displacement and isolation brought about by two experiences of immigration, multiple moves and a mixed heritage. My parents immigrated from Russia when I was eight years old. We first moved to Israel, and then three years later made the move to Canada. As a young woman, I had to adapt to a new Canadian home, language, culture and my new role as the “other.” Growing up in Russian community, I never questioned my place as an exotic female in the eyes of my Canadian peers. I experienced constant curiosity from my friends. However this interest was always grounded in my identification as an outsider. My desire to study acting and filmmaking was rooted in an impulse to tell stories about women that I knew and loved. I grew up hearing family lore from my grandmother and mother, always anchored in the figure of the strong, surviving, loving matriarch. Figures of Russian women filled my imagination, ranging from heroines in *War and Peace*, to the story of my great grandmother whose life was torn to pieces by Joseph Stalin’s “great terror.”

As I explored my possibilities as a young actress and media professional in the West, I found myself pegged as the “Russian Model,” the “Russian Spy,” and inevitably, the “Russian Mail-Order Bride.” I did not give this much thought at the time, as I accepted my role choices. In my life outside of acting, I constantly faced comments that created a “role” for me to play in the imagination of my boyfriends, friends and teachers - the Russian. Despite not having distinctly Russian features, and being of mixed ethnic heritage, I was always playing the Russian Girl. It was as if that persona was a safe and desired commodity, and a winning figure for me to occupy.

The intention behind my return to academia has been to learn a new way of thinking about my experience in the world of Western media, both as a consumer and as a creator. I wanted to use my skills as a storyteller and performer to create a project that comments on and explores the themes that I find most important to me as a creative woman of Russian heritage. Since beginning the Media Studies Program last year, my ideas about gender, displacement, female objectification, globalization, media literacy, commerce and human rights have been redefined through my exposure to writings by prominent theorists, as well as stimulating class discussions on the subjects of the power of images, stereotypes, feminism, immigration, fear of

the other, internet communication and pop-cultural tropes around foreign female bodies in the Western imagination. Therefore, I came to understand the unsettling relationship between the way I and other ‘foreigners’ may unknowingly accept and play into a constructed, false image created by and for the Western gaze. I would like to challenge and disrupt the image of the foreign female figure, by focusing on one specific script in which Russian women engage with – Western, pop-cultural, commercial and socio-political notions about them. In this research-creation thesis, I use the avatar of the Russian Mail Order Bride (RMOB) and the topic itself as a platform to recast and retell a story about the fear, self-determination, courage, stereotypes and desire surrounding the modern Russian woman; these traits can be universally applied to female bodies from other cultures as well. My approach to this project is from the perspective of an outsider who craves to have an understanding of the modern woman of Russian heritage. This figure has been removed from my everyday life and yet is prevalent in my history, culture, and self-identification as a Russian immigrant. I would like to honor my heritage and the women in my family, who have made my current experience of freedom, education and abundance possible.

My Research-Creation

In this research-creation, I marry my creative practice as a writer, performer and director, with a concrete and organized way of conducting and sharing scholarly research. My artistic practice as an academic is coming through in this text, and the visual project that was born alongside it. I am greatly encouraged by Ross Gibson’s critical examination of the phenomenon of experience as being intrinsic to art (Gibson 2010), as he explores the connection and exciting possibilities offered by paying heed to the creative, intuitive and emotionally charged part of the researcher’s work, as much as to their formal academic inquiry and experimentation. In this project I seek to legitimize the work created through my body and imagination, following extensive and dedicated research into a salient social issue.

Research-creation allows artists within academia to create art that is intended to be widely shared and accessible to a unique type of audience, comprised of scholars, the general public and those particularly interested in the fine, performance and digital media arts, while inspiring conversation and offering a space to share the voices of those we seldom award our attention (Chapman & Sawchuk 2012).

I have come to experience the act of researching as a creative process and the creative process informing my research. What struck me in the process of conducting my research is that I

was performing the roles of a student, researcher and audience member simultaneously. In concert with this experiential process, I was implementing my artistic discipline as a writer-performer in literally immersing myself within the very personae I was investigating in my analysis. In crafting my characters, I created their stories through the text they would perform and the setting in which they existed.

My process as an actor and writer is deeply steeped in the work of Sanford Meisner (1987) and the notion of being fully present with the given circumstances of the character, while using improvisation as the main tool in transforming written material to an embodied performance. Throughout my investigation of the RMOB, I wrote and improvised around the images that I imagined as a result of my observations. Whilst my research progressed, a series of monologues and scenes for the camera began to emerge as a springboard for further work.

Thus, in finally performing the final scenes, I relied on my research and the insights experienced through my journaling, to inform the choices I made as an actor, creating the story within the given circumstances of my characters (Meisner 1987). It was through this process that the final strokes of the characters I was researching, were finalized. Research-creation thus became a way for me to experience my findings fully through the women I created in my script, and in tandem with my research, allowing for it to evolve into a piece that goes beyond the traditional framework of an academic thesis. Hence, the text below is as alive as my video vignettes, as its structure, language and flow grew out of the scenes I created and performed.

Research-creation as a methodology has allowed me to create an imaginary ethnography as I tried to intuitively summarize and share my findings. I hope my work can posit questions that I, as a single, Russian female immigrant, found necessary to address through the accessible and playful medium of performance. In "Practice in the Flesh of Theory: Art, Research, and the Fine Arts PhD" (2012) Natalie Loveless beautifully articulates my excitement about and respect for research-creation practices as she writes:

I am fundamentally interested in the daily labor and daily play of *makingthinking* practices, whatever the form, whether social, political, electronic, sculpted, painted, performed, or imagined. What matters is our willingness to engage the multiple ways in which this "making" is a fundamentally situated, relational construct; one that entangles us in relations of debt in ways for which we can never account, despite always being willing to be accountable. (p. 103)

Here, I present a review of the salient themes emerging from the literature and films I researched on the subject of the RMOB, in a written form below. The performance piece that is now alive on YouTube will continue to exist, and is widely available to a global audience, for as long as the video-streaming mammoth exists. This gives a timelessness to the project that I intend to be a springboard for an empathetic questioning framework within and beyond academia.

I chose to use to use the metaphor of the Russian Doll (a.k.a “The Matrioshka Doll”) in my title, since it symbolizes the romantic notion of Russian culture through its traditional, attractive female emblem. However, for those familiar with this wooden toy, the doll is not what she seems. The brightly painted, voluptuous figurine, hides within it many more of its kind, nested tightly inside its womb. As I investigate the subject of the Russian Mail Order Bride, through this image, I want to address the multiple concentric layers of the female “Other,” which are hidden from the public’s view. Thus, I aim to unravel the ideas my audience may have about the RMOB, by creating my own figurines, which will tell different sides of the story, each with her own distinct voice, but always strongly linked to one another.

Throughout the process of creating this work, I have kept a journal of my research activities, as well as my creative practice, including the writing and performative exercises I have been practicing as part of my methodology. The creative element of my research continues throughout my work and culminates in the screenplay, performance and final cut of the video vignettes that draw on all of the elements of my written thesis on the RMOB figure on the media. (See Appendix I & II).

Storytelling is a way for human beings to connect to each other’s experiences and become inspired to exercise kindness, patience and openness when confronted with the figure of the “other,” the outsider or the stranger next door. As I am sharing the stories below, I will let each chapter unfold through the characters of my script, each one bringing forth the dominant issues addressed by my vignettes, always anchoring my work in my main research question: *What comes to the surface when the reality of the RMOB is articulated with her own voice, alongside the dominant portrayals of her experience that emerge from academic sources, online RMOB platforms and popular media?*

The Video Project: “Undoing the Russian Doll”

The visual part of my project consists of seven scenes. The written text which guides us through my research is presented in the following sections. I decided to let my video vignettes

drive the text, as each character represents and guides the audience through the written sections, which address the most salient issues around the RMOB. The video is designed to stand on its own, should it find an online audience beyond my committee. However a virtual copy of the textual component is linked within it, should the viewer desire to investigate my work further.

I experimented with different hairstyles, costumes and physicality. Having always grounded my work in improvisation I decided to rehearse them in front of the camera first. When the time came to shoot them, I threw away the exact scripts I had been rehearsing, and let the material come forth as it would had I been put on the spot in front of the camera, as were my subjects. It was exciting and difficult to shoot the many takes of each scene, directing myself and allowing for spontaneity while staying within the frames of my script's story. Each scene is thus an evolution of my ideas concerning specific voices that speak to the RMOB experience. Thus, I have produced a research-creation project that has resulted in the following text, a script comprising of seven vignettes and their performance on video. This work emerges out of a conversation with my research and review of existing scholarship and film depictions of the RMOB phenomenon.

Why a video performance piece?

The video vignettes are the guiding voices of the following thesis, allowing for a deeper analysis of the RMOB story from different perspectives. The characters driving each scene or vignette, engage with dominant issues within the industry. My aim here, is to connect the diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the RMOB figure, offering the points of view of academia, the media, the industry itself, as well as the individuals directly affected by the RMOB platform.

Performance artists have the opportunity of using their senses and memory while utilizing language in tandem with their physicality in order to come into the immediate visual and energetic experience of the viewer. In acting out a script, which was written in concert with research conducted over a long period of time, I have been able to articulate the most prominent issues surrounding the RMOB, while infusing it with my personal identification of and understanding of the Russian single woman.

Since the contemporary RMOB business is based in the production and dissemination of online images, it only follows that my intervention into the subject should produce a project that utilizes both a textual and a visual technology.

A performance captured on video is a powerful tool, as it allows for the communication of ideas on screen, thus sharing and preserving a story that may otherwise never be heard. I am drawing here from Diana Taylor's (2016) writing on the role that performance occupies in the creation of new practices, through which artists and academics can inspire change. My intention in using this platform and aesthetic, is that it will be more accessible to a younger generation of viewers who will be intrigued by the voice of a foreign, exotic woman embodying the figure of the RMOB. Thus, an important outcome of this work is the video's potential to attract online attention and reach media consumers beyond academia. The video format is easy to follow and is meant as a simple play, which brings forth existing research on the RMOB, while offering a space in which to engage with a female protagonist, who takes over the story by reclaiming her voice back from Western academics, media producers and RMOB business owners.

The Project Breakdown

The seven vignettes, which comprise the final video performance piece, guide us through the text, introduce us to the RMOB industry, while sharing one woman's experience as she steps into the RMOB figure.

The main corpus of material that I investigated consists of three of the most popular online RMOB agencies, selected academic texts, current news coverage as well as two fiction and three documentary films on the subject. I have set these parameters because I wish to use an array of perspectives as well as my experiences as a Canadian consumer, Russian immigrant, female student and writer-performer. This point of view allows for a further exploration and pushes the boundaries of contemporary knowledge production on the subject, in light of my main research question.

The first part of the video begins with outsiders' perspectives. In "*They Know Nothing*", the audience is introduced to a Montreal-based journalist, Maighan Markelle, as she takes us through different interpretations of the RMOB through the voices of her three interview subjects. Below, I expand on the key characteristics of each interviewee in terms of what they bring to the evolving conversation about the Russian Mail Order Bride. My choice of Maighan Markelle was not explicitly predicated on the real figure of Rachel Meghan Markle, but rather an unconscious association given the proliferation of her image and name in the popular media.

The Interviewees

The first is to be interviewed in this simulated broadcast is Jennifer Burbich, in “*Let Me Save You.*” Jennifer is a PhD student who is doing her thesis on the subject of RMOBs and offers us a feminist scholar’s point of view. The next vignette, “*I Feel Sorry for Her,*” offers a gateway into the intentions and desires of the Western man buying into the industry, through Jessica, whose brother Kris Schwartz has “ordered” a Russian bride. This series ends “*Get Thee to A Russian Mail Order Bride Website*” featuring Svetlana Campbell, the owner of an RMOB agency, who contributes her viewpoint from the business side of the industry.

In the second part of the video, with “*A Life Worth Leaving,*” the audience can finally put a face to the avatar of the RMOB discussed by the voices heard in the first section of the project. Here, we meet Aliona, who has just joined an RMOB agency in Moscow. Her journey continues with “*A Life Worth Leaving*” following her meeting her future husband through the agency. The series concludes with “*I Can Learn to Love You,*” where the viewers encounter Aliona following her arrival in Quebec, and marriage to her Canadian fiancé, Kris.

The video episodes are designed to be a blend of a mockumentary, vlogging footage, soliloquy, and audition pieces, which fragment the experiences of a variety of women, situating the project as a bridge between academic research, questions of female empowerment and a woman’s specific and mysterious “situated knowledge”(Haraway 1988) (See Glossary of Terms). I stepped into the RMOB avatar, feeling the need to give a physical, corporeal voice to an imaginary scenario revolving around a situation that is being looked at from a distance by most of the existing scholarship and popular culture productions. These scenes take into account and expose the political, social, economic, historical and cultural realities that better situate the reasons underpinning the Russian Mail Order Bride businesses’ success and growth. My intention is to enrich existing Western scholarship by translating my research into a multi-media, live-action project, which can be used as an educational tool for a possible intervention into the RMOB industry.

In looking at the industry as a whole, and conducting a preliminary analysis of the existing scholarship on the subject, I realize that there is a critical gap in the research, insofar as the experience of Russian Mail Order Brides (RMOBs) in contemporary Russia is concerned. Consequently, I want to emphasize the problematic normativity of the RMOB business, while offering a fresh perspective on the women involved, by creating a figure that embodies their

agency as well as their critical positioning which prompts them to advertise themselves on the RMOB platform. Thus, I also investigate the RMOB as a symptom of the social conditions that are currently in place in Russia.

The following text includes the conclusions drawn from my research, observational notes and the screenplay itself. Here, I have documented the main chapters of the Russian female experience in Russia, as it relates to history, politics, social rules, the emergence of the global network, and gender roles. I use the adjective “Western” sparingly throughout my writing, as it encompasses the American, Canadian, British and Australian men who are the predominant market for RMOBs.

I recommend viewing the video before proceeding to the following chapters, for the audience to better acquaint themselves with the voices behind each vignette.

Using the voices of the women that carry my video project, I discuss the objectification of RMOB in the media, the possible motivations of the men that enter the industry as their potential husbands and the websites and strategies that are used to market these women. I conclude with an overview of personal experiences of Russian women who live in modern Russian city centers, as well the experience of Russian Mail Order Brides as immigrants as told by Aliona, the protagonist of my project, who narrates her story in the second part of my video project. The key questions informing this project are:

1. How is the Russian Mail Order Bride represented in mass media and popular culture?
2. What role do gendered relations in post-soviet, capitalist Russia play in the RMOB phenomenon?
3. How does this relate to the structure and aesthetic of the online RMOB dating websites?
4. What role does Western neo-colonialism and the exotification of foreign female bodies play in the abuse of RMOB by their Western partners?
5. Is there a way to analyze the RMOB industry within a feminist framework?

Without further ado, I now invite you to view the video part of “Becoming a Russian Doll”, at this location:

“[Undoing the Russian Doll](https://youtu.be/Tci3S06hPEE)”: <https://youtu.be/Tci3S06hPEE>

After the show, its’ heroines and I will meet you on the pages below.

Fade in from black. Lights. Camera. Action.

**VIGNETTE ONE:
“They Know Nothing”**



Figure 1: Maighan Markelle. Still from “Undoing the Russian Doll” (2018).

The Western audience and Popular Media meets

Maighan Markelle, TV personality

In responding to my question of “What comes to the surface when the reality of the RMOB is articulated with her own voice, alongside the dominant portrayals of her experience that emerge from the academic, online and documentary media?,” I begin my analysis by centering the Western popular media spokesperson caught within the meta-narrative of Hollywood-style news reporting: Enter Miss Maighan Markelle and the evening news special with a voice over introducing her in the following fashion:

Welcome to the Montreal special news at six soundstage, where popular host Maighan Markelle is bringing you curious stories and media sensations in and around the city. Her special report this evening is part of the “Stories from here” series. She is introducing the subject of the Russian Mail Order Bride, which, as she

mentions, is a multi-billion dollar business venture operating across the Western world.¹

Within the sensationalist reporting style on the subject of RMOBs the Western audience's understanding of the subject is limited to widely available news articles and movies that touch upon it. As demonstrated by Maighan Markelle, visual media has a critical grasp on the way we perceive other human beings, especially when seeing them on a screen. In a way, the TV host enters our home environments from the screen and narrates a story, we are meant to take as true. Influenced by the RMOB websites' marketing of their product, the Western media's representations of the Mail Order Bride phenomenon often offer discriminatory, sexist and ethnocentric portrayals of the figure of the MOB within pop culture (Yakushko & Rajan 2017).

According to Stuart Hall, the "other" is not just there to represent some unknown enemy or exotic being; we need it in order to form our own identities and understanding of the world and our place in it (Hall 1997: 16). People tend to only see themselves in relation to others. Are RMOBs gold-diggers? Victims? Lonely women? Miss Markelle's choice of adjectives is reflective of the dominant characteristics attributed to the RMOB through mainstream media.

As Maighan Markelle demonstrates, the media displays a plethora of pop-culture references to the RMOB industry through a variety of platforms including YouTube and television, as well as magazine articles and made-for television fiction films. Today, these articles and films are widely disseminated online and thus incorporated into the popular imagination, in contrast to the theories and facts presented in academic literature which I analyze further in my text.

Print Media Stereotypes

In the print media, we find the proliferation of stereotypes that range from the abused foreign woman to the gorgeous young vixen. In an article by Meghan Keneally and Snejana Farberov for the *Daily Mail*, entitled "Man Who Killed His Mail-Order Bride May Have 'Gotten Away With Murder Of Girlfriend A Decade Earlier,'" the audience is invited to associate the RMOB industry with murder as a heinous effect of the violence that often stays hidden in these relationships. Furthermore, some news stories insist that the RMOB industry is closely tied to

¹ Chun (1996); Holway (2012).

human trafficking, as does the 2012 *Vulture Magazine* article: "The Sex Industry – A Peek Under the Covers: Part 3 Mail Order Brides." Meanwhile, Lera Loeb's article in *Glamour*: "Yes, This Woman Is A 'Mail-Order Bride,'" offers a glamorous representation of a trophy wife. We are presented with Western clients and their "brides" as individuals looking for love, many of which utilize stereotypes of older Western males accompanied by attractive, wholesome Russian women. Meanwhile, the 2013 *Fortune* magazine article by Anne VanderMey, "The Mail-Order Bride Boom," identifies some problematics of the industry, but overall, creates a positive view of the RMOB platform as one that has the potential to be a successful and legitimate business model that offers its customers a chance at love.

In the following film analysis I examine fiction and documentary films that focus on the subject of the RMOB. While I draw from the storylines and questions posed by the films in my creative project, I intend to focus on the repetitive themes, characters and discourses which these visual entertainment present to a larger public, as they are appropriated into the popular imagination, in contrast to the theories and facts presented in the academic literature.

Stereotypes in Celluloid

The narrow range of stereotypes and opinions in the above popular media texts is echoed in the films which bring the RMOB figure to life, quite literally. The prototype of a lonely, fragile and potentially dishonest, exotic woman prevails. For this analysis, I have Megan Markelle of the evening news recommend two feature fiction films, *Birthday Girl* (2002) and *2 Brothers & a Bride (A Foreign Affair)* (2004), to her audience as these works stand out in the quality of their production and content, and are easily accessible online.



Figure 2. "Birthday Girl" (2002) poster. Source: imdb.com

Birthday Girl, featuring Nicole Kidman, attained a wide international exposure due to its affiliation with Hollywood, and is possibly the best known feature film representation of the RMOB. The story paints a portrait of the Russian mail-order bride figure, that sadly confirms the degrading stereotypes associated with RMOBs, while providing a strong marketing push in favor of the industry itself. It features the glamorous Kidman as Nadia, a manipulative, mysterious, sexy and vulnerable heroine, who takes advantage of the naive, love-struck Englishman, John (Ben Chaplin). What ensues is a romantic comedy, which introduces Nadia as a sexy, but deceitful woman, working with a gang of con-artists intent on robbing Western men who “order” Nadia as their wife through the internet. At first, Nadia plays the role of domestic, sexually adventurous and naive girl, who speaks no English, and enjoys knitting, hitting all of the notes established by the media about RMOBs in general, and Russian women specifically.

The idea of “gender performativity” (See Glossary of Terms), as explored by Judith Butler (1988) is an important element to bring up here, and we must look at Nadia’s objectified body as that of a gendered marionette, conforming to a set of rules which we accept as natural and based in reality. The acting occurs not only on screen, but within the unspoken script that inspired the film, which is rooted in gender stereotypes and through which Russian women in particular enter the Western imagination. The *performance* of either the caretaker, the whore or the mother is in play here, as Nadia caters to the fantasy established by RMOB websites, and the general media depicting Russian women in general. Other than Nadia’s looks, prowess in the bedroom and cooking talent, we are not provided with an appreciation of her inner qualities as a potential romantic partner. Later in the film, she morphs into a femme fatale, obeying her male Russian “handlers,” while taking advantage of John’s feelings for her. Nadia is thus both a victim of her circumstances, and a woman implicated in criminal operations, taking advantage of gullible and lovesick Western men. As a romantic comedy would have it, Nadia’s fate is redeemed by Ben’s noble behavior and love for her. Within this plotline we have an innocent and heroic Western man saving the flawed damsel in distress from a life of crime. This film is a prime example of pop culture’s ability to proliferate specific storylines and discourses around the body of the Russian Mail Order Bride, presenting us with an entertaining story that does not posit specific questions about the RMOBs’ specific experience.

Figure 3. "2 Brothers & a Bride (A Foreign Affair)" (2003 poster). Source: imdb.com



While *2 Brothers & a Bride* (2004), presents a different narrative from *Birthday Girl*, it nonetheless reaffirms equally superficial and dangerous stereotypes. The storyline focuses on the process of selecting a Russian wife that fits the Western male desire for a housewife, nanny and caretaker. American brothers Jake (Tim Blake Nelson) and Josh (David Arquette), incredulously realize that they are incapable of taking care of their basic needs, such as cooking and cleaning following their mother's passing in their rural farming community. After being yelled at to "get yourselves a wife" by a cleaning lady, Jake decides to book a romance tour through the "A Foreign Affair" website. The audience is given a delineation of what makes Russian women a hot commodity for a Western man looking for a maid or a cook, in a telling exchange where Jake explains to his brother: "A Russian woman knows her place in the home and is happy with it. Her whole upbringing is schooling for one thing, 'how to take care of a man.'" Prior to introducing us to any Russian women, the film creates a female "other" that represents the exotic figure to be colonized by the male savior (Hall 1997). This notion is firmly planted in the Western audience's imagination, critically relying on the inner characteristics of the mythical Russian woman, rather than her physical exoticism. It is her character, assumed values and desires, that make her vulnerable to being viewed as an exotic bounty for the Western conqueror, despite her "whiteness."

As the brothers embark on their tour, they are told right away that after their two week tour is done, they will never want to date American women, and as proof their guide shows off his Russian wife, claiming that “this works.” The scene is an example of how the majority of the romance tours and websites operate, showing examples of happy couples, and supporting their claim that Russian women are everything Western women are not. Throughout the film Jake keeps bringing up the fact that the trip is focused on finding a traditional woman who will be happy to cook and clean the house, while remaining meek, compliant and grateful for the opportunity to obtain a green card. Marriage tourism, highly advertised by some websites, offers another income avenue for the RMOB business model, while reinforcing the “shopping” aspect of the phenomenon (Merriman 2012).

The Russian woman’s voice is obscured in the content of the film in favor of a narrative which privileges the Western male characters’ judgment and choice of a woman to suit their image of an ideal wife. A poignant example of this discourse is explored in a scene that takes place between Josh and a young woman whom he is clearly enthralled with, Anna, (who is the only significant female character embodied by a Russian actress). However, after they spend some time together and Anna asks Josh if he will attend any more “socials,” he confirms her anxiety, by stating that he has to make sure that she is “the one,” adding: “I have to compare you to a lot of women...you understand don’t you?” This simple exchange is devastating, as it clearly displays the dynamics of power between these visiting men and their control over the women they meet. His belief that she must understand his perspective places him in the position of privilege, as she is left waiting to be chosen, despite their obvious attraction to each other.

Whilst fiction films are the main way by which Western audiences have come to know the RMOB figure, Maighan Markelle would also recommend to her audience certain documentary films that confront the subject with a different intention than would a narrative film. However, she would probably avoid mentioning that it is imperative to stay mindful of the fact that documentary films are also created with a specific intention conceived by its makers. As an audience, we must refrain from taking all that is being posited in the following films as indisputable truth.

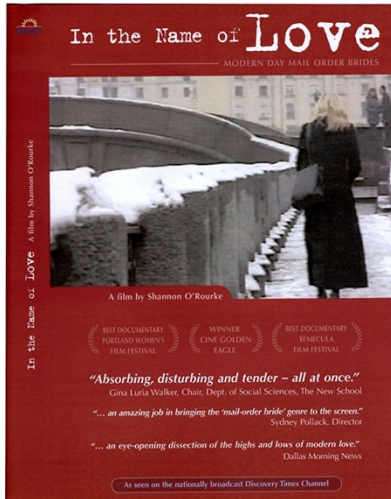


Figure 4. "In the Name of Love" (2002) poster. Source: imdb.com

Shannon O'Rourke's *In The Name of Love* (2002) highlights a number of important points, and while the film may be a little dated, it touches upon subjects that are ever-present in more recent literature and media. O'Rourke's documentary situates the RMOB as a contested territory due to the industry's connection to human trafficking and abuse, but does not linger on these, instead attempting to create a portrait of three women on their journeys as RMOBs. An important aspect of this film is that the women chosen to be documented are all fluent in English, well-rounded, and what we would consider "wholesome." They appear to make decisions on their own, and reside in a large city center, St-Petersburg. It becomes evident that the drive for a career and a family are not mutually exclusive in Russia, as demonstrated by Elena Voskresenskaya, a successful realtor and a single mother. She is a very interesting example of an independent, confident, self-made woman, who openly enjoys her career, while expressing her desire to take care of a man and have a traditional family in which she can express herself as a loving wife.

Considering that the RMOB's physical attractiveness is a driving factor for the men browsing their profiles, the selection process reaffirms the customer's power, as he chooses his fantasy wife. In "*Two Brothers and a Bride*," discussed in the previous section, we witness the way male Western tourists go shopping for a wife in Russia, guided by their agency's "romance tour" guide: they look through catalogues, make color coded lists, arrange for a bulk speed dating meeting with the "right ones" and go on test dates.



Figure 5. *Love Me* (2014) poster. Source: imdb.com

Meanwhile, *Love Me*, a 2014 documentary film aiming to investigate the RMOB industry, exposes the audience to a large amount of provocatively dressed hopeful brides, available to the men investing in “romance tours.” Despite the fact that films introduces likeable candidates, three out of the six storylines feature shady encounters with beautiful women, who appear to be linked to fraud and even crime, creating a narrative that victimizes the men. The film exposes the audience to interview clips that allow the RMOB agency owners to share their advice with their prospective male customers, stating that the women they represent are vetted, and encouraging their male customers to meet them in person. However, half of the potential unions in the film are unsuccessful due to the women’s seeming involvement in some kind of dishonest activity, targeted at getting money from the naive men they meet on the RMOB websites, and through the agencies’ services. The women may have the final say, but it comes from a subservient position. Nevertheless, the women’s self-determination has a way to present itself, much to the dismay of the “buyers.” Maighan Markelle would point us to a sad example of this occurring in the film, as one severely overweight, middle aged, reclusive man shares his fascination with the woman he has been corresponding with, showing her picture off on his phone, as he adds that she looks like “Angelina Jolie.” Their meeting does not result in a happy ending, although he goes as far as immediately proposing marriage to her.

Similarly, in “*DOCS: Diary Of A...Mail Order Bride*” (2009) we are exposed to the men’s unsettling pursuits of much younger, attractive women in their online correspondence, as is demonstrated in the face of the middle-aged and overweight David, who is interested in the

pretty Alexandra. Their story appears to be a cautionary tale, showing his failed attempt at connecting with his chosen RMOB, who is younger than his daughter. Despite coming to visit him, she is quickly disillusioned with his character and lifestyle, and happily returns home, stating she will not be returning. David appears heartbroken while confessing he had also been sending her money throughout their online courtship. Is he a victim in this “transaction”? The film insinuates that the naive Western man has indeed been taken advantage of.



Figure 6. "Diary Of A...Mail Order Bride" (2009) poster. Source: youtube.com

To remedy this narrative, the film shares a heartwarming storyline, which follows Dave and Liuda, as they finally meet in person, following months of online courtship through their online MOB agency. Dave comes to visit her with the full intention to propose, and they decide to get married after spending a total of eight days together, and claiming to be in love. As the film mentions, this fairy tale ending places the couple within the five to seven percent of RMOB unions that result in marriage. Their story attempts to show the audience that a happy ending is possible. Yet, we are left with lingering questions concerning the strength and sincerity of their marriage. Importantly, the film does not offer much insight into the women it profiles as part of its story, which is focused on the men’s journey for happiness. Even Liuda is only allowed enough screen time to state, in her broken English, that she fell in love with Dave within the span of one week and is now committed to sharing her life with him. In this documentary account of the RMOB industry, her naive statements juxtaposed with Alexandra’s tirades about being disappointed in the much older David, are the extent to which the audience is shown the inner world of the Russian women placing themselves online to find a Western husband.

The discourse contained in the cinematic media's contribution to the subject of the RMOB appears to expose a mysterious and dark industry, while focusing its content on puns and jokes, often at the expense of showing the reality of the business and its subjects. The visual power of a news segment or a film, is often at the core of most Western ideas concerning the experiences of those that the media strategically positions as the "Other" (Hall 1990) before an audience, of which we are a critical part.

In the world of media representations, it greatly matters which voices are creating the RMOB roles I am investigating with my work. Maighan Markelle's "Stories from Here" introduces us to the mass media's calculated attempt to shed light on the RMOB world, as it exists in Montreal, and the polished host's contribution in this scene is a perfect example of light, North American entertainment. In the next section, her "Stories from Here" offer us three individual testimonials on the subject, each bringing forth a distinct female point of view, while speaking to the Western gaze. Their positioning may help us see beyond the media's glamorous attempts to portray the Russian Mail Order Bride. There is a clear need for more popular media narratives that attempt to shed light on this phenomenon, and that focus on the human side of the RMOB.

VIGNETTE TWO: “Let Me Save You”



Figure 7. Jennifer Burbich. Sill from “Undoing the Russian Doll” (2018).

Jennifer Burbich, doctoral student: “The RMOB is an “outsider” and a victim”

I now introduce Maighan Markelle’s first subject, Jennifer Burbich, a PhD student who establishes the subject at hand with a serious and worried energy. As she sheds some light on the dominant academic perspectives on the RMOB, she brings up the important elements that emerged through her research into the situation of the contemporary Russian woman who becomes a mail order bride. One dominant theme that is evident in Jennifer’s testimonial, is the view of the RMOB woman as a victim at the mercy of a Western man.

The victimization of the “other” (Hall 2007a) is easily accepted in the West, where our “superhero” obsessed culture is always encouraging meta-narratives that further reinforce the West as the developed, stronger, more evolved and more capable of “saving” the rest of the world. What makes these meta-narratives dangerous, is the fact that despite having good reasons to inquire into the possible and existing abuse of the RMOB, the women themselves are never seen as autonomous figures of visible depth, strength or worth. The discourse around the online

Russian brides as gold-diggers, victims, commodities and essentially grotesque figures far removed from the Western female experience, strengthens oppressive ideologies of power. David Hook's (2001) reflections on the work of Michel Foucault (See Glossary of Terms), and the insidious way power is enacted through the creation and normalization of Western ideologies of domination and consumerism are of critical importance as we look at the literature and films attempting to dissect different aspects of the RMOB industry. While Jennifer is speaking to a mass audience, she does not attempt to elaborate on her investigation into the nature of power (See Glossary of Terms). I would like to expand on her testimonial, by stating that dominant discourse created by the media, enters the audience's subconscious. There, the white male savior's presence can make the figure of the RMOB "other" appear as less-than human and incapable of navigating her own life. Thus the "other" lives on the outskirts of Western power and its effect on the world.

This framework is bound to attract media and academic attention, as Russian women who become RMOBs are regarded as highly vulnerable, potential victims of abuse, deceit and slavery should they decide to emigrate to join their Western fiancé. As Jennifer points out, it is important for Western consumers to be aware that the Russian Mail Order Bride (RMOB) business is indeed critically linked to human trafficking, slavery, and abuse, with 35,000 to 57,750 Russian women becoming victims of human trafficking each year" (Unicef 2017).

Since the undoing of the Soviet Union, Russian women have been more likely to fall into positions of servitude and victimhood. Political uncertainty and economic devastation combined with unemployment, substance abuse, and domestic violence make them highly vulnerable to aggression and exploitation (Welch 2005). Today, Russian women are in a precarious position regarding the physical abuse that insidiously exists in many Russian households, where it is often normalized (Holway 2012). In January 2017, the Russian parliament decriminalized conjugal assault (Human Rights Watch 2017) Thus, a Russian woman's need for safety is de-legitimized. The MOB industry in general is rooted in the exploitation of specific female bodies, which, as Christine Chun (1996: 1174) aptly notes: "comprise the bottom of the social hierarchy in Europe." Ethnicity, social status and the prevalent exoticification of foreign women, all play a significant role in placing these female bodies as an acceptable commodity to view, assess and purchase online, all within an open, international market. According to Chun, following the dissemination of the Soviet Union, the MOB business model entered the Russian market,

exploiting Russian women's desire and new-found ability to leave their country. She observes that capitalist systems of power further proliferate male, colonial and inevitably "white" values in their domination of the second and third worlds, where the online representations of RMOBs play into this matrix of these power structures. Human slavery can thus comfortably exist in the ambiguous world of international marriages, where a woman's body is always being considered an object to appraise and purchase.

Jennifer Burbich tries to bring our attention to the controlled transnational displacement of commodified female bodies through online business transactions. The RMOB websites facilitate a new style of emotional and physical manipulation of vulnerable bodies within a contested economic and citizenship sphere. Jennifer's work is based in her research into the stories of physical abuse inflicted on foreign brides by the men ordering them online, which have started to appear more frequently in the news media, creating a much-needed focus on regulating the industry (Chun 1996, Holway 2012). The case of Anastasia King, a RMOB murdered by her husband in 2000 (Holway 2012), appears to have created a media frenzy and brought much-needed attention to the serious physical and emotional abuse in marriages between RMOBs and their Western husbands. When it later became known that King's husband had a history of domestic abuse allegations, Anastasia's story, among others, spurred an investigation into the industry (Chun 1996, Holway 2012, Jackson 2007, Welch 2005). While the implementation of The International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (or "IMBRA") in 2005, "*imposes significant new requirements on U.S.- based IMBs and DHS's administration of the visa process*" (Jackson, 2007: 907), and has created some form of control over the international marriage brokers, or IMBs, which are now more closely regulated by the state, an intervention beyond the IMBRA is necessary.

Jennifer urges us to notice that in order to successfully intervene and protect the women involved in the RMOB business, it is imperative to not only apply guidelines to the way the websites operate and screen their clients, but to also educate and support the RMOBs throughout the process. This means informing the women about their legal rights and sharing with them the resources and support systems that are available to them as new immigrants to a Western society, regardless of their position as MOBs who may not yet hold citizenship in their new country (Chun 1996, Holway 2012, Jackson 2007). As both Suzanne Jackson and Shalei Holway (2007, 2012) point out, RMOBs often fear deportation and thus may not seek help or information from

anyone outside of their immediate new family. Further, their displacement puts them in a precarious and lonely position, where their only connection to the outside world comes in the face of their new partner, whom they may not know at all (Chun 1996, Holway 2012, Jackson 2007). A separation from family, cultural network and friends provides for a very dangerous space in which newly immigrant women exist, as they also inhabit the role of a virtually ordered product. Thus, a more focused study of the individual experience of the RMOB as new immigrants is needed, if their roles as potential victims of abuse and domination are to be effectively safeguarded against by Western social and legal systems.

While the economic power is firmly fixed in the man's favor, his choice of a specific woman, among hundreds apparently waiting for his attention, does not extend that power to the bride who is being "chosen," as the Western male consumers are buying into the fantasy of a perfect housewife whose economic status immediately places her at the mercy of her "savior" (Chun 1996). However, ironically, the decision to place themselves in an online catalogue may serve as an indicator that RMOB women are eager to take control of their lives and act courageously to effect drastic changes in their lives. This is discordant with the idea of a meek and docile housewife at the mercy of her circumstances and the man she is partnered with (Chun 1996, Holway 2012).

The view of RMOBs as victims is justified in the fact that these migrant women who come to the West as brides and often find themselves, alone, abused and unaware of their rights or the possible legal support available to them. RMOBs can sometimes also find themselves involved in trafficking schemes, which place them into positions of forced labor, as insinuated in by Ericka Johnson in her 2007 book, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband* where it is unclear whether one of her interviewees, the beautiful single-mother, Tanya, is being coerced into a trafficking scam in exchange for an opportunity to come to the US, or if she is in fact just another hopeful bride. The risk of an arrangement that is advertised as a trip to meet a potential husband, may in fact turn into a life of servitude and sexual exploitation, and the blurry lines between slavery and the MOB industry are apparent in these accounts (Johnson 2007: 89).

Regrettably, the existence of domestic abuse and sexual subjugation of female bodies in these unions can evolve into a myth as the men may become suspicious of their RMOBs, fearing deceit. These men can thus use their power and the prominence of their voice to bring attention to

their intentions and worries, while detracting from the vulnerability of the women they pursue in the online world of MOBs (Welch 2005).

While the academic approach to the RMOB as a victim, offers an avenue by which to help support the women and change the industry, the online discussions between certain men interested in the industry creates a dangerous narrative in which the RMOB's prevalent representation as a weak and vulnerable commodity further facilitates white, male domination over female bodies (Welch 2005). Thus, as the worrying parallels between the discourses around human trafficking and arranged internet marriages become palpable, they entrench further the figure of the RMOB as a likely victim (Chun 1996, Jackson 2007, Johnson 2007, Yakushko & Rajan 2017).

One of Ms. Burbich's concerns lies in the fact that a lot of the abuse goes unreported and is hard to investigate further, as many RMOBs will seldom expose their predicament, finding themselves alone, uninformed, intimidated and possibly threatened by their new partner (Jackson 2007). The legal reality the women experience by marrying a foreigner and moving away from their culture is an important area of concern. As the RMOB's enter into a new legal system and language, they are coming from a culture which, as mentioned before, does little to regulate or oppose domestic violence. Thus, these women often assume that the same rules and laws apply in the West, which is certainly not the case (Jackson 2007). Especially in cases of domestic violence, Russia and the United States or Canada differ greatly, not only in the legal procedures of protecting the abused party, but also in their cultural expectations and views on spousal abuse. This explains to some degree as to why Russian women often accept their abusive partners in the West, or stay silent when they experience emotional or physical abuse.

Not only is marital violence quite normalized in Russia (Johnson 2001), but the women affected by it have little to no access to shelters, social services or moral support that often guides Western state-run interventions to help them (Johnson & Aino 2011). New RMOB immigrants on a fiancée visa do not have an understanding of the legal protection they may seek in their new country (Holway 2012), and thus, they are often scared to "rock the boat" in their transnational relationships.

As Oksana Yakushko and Indhushree Rajan (2017) note that: "Such imbalances in economic power between 'brides' and 'grooms' point to continued global disparity and capitalist commodification of gender and reproduction on a global scale" (191); the West's economic

power and general dominance over “developing” countries, is conveniently producing female subjects to perform in a white, male fantasy created and maintained by the clever marketing strategies of the International Marriage Brokers (Chun 1996).

It is equally important to note that International Marriage Brokers, or IMBs, can hinder their female clients’ awareness of the help available to them in West, once they find themselves threatened or abused (Chun 1996, Jackson 2007). The trading of female bodies and their abuse can likewise be seen as a result of the specific marketing techniques and lack of serious legal regulations within the industry (Jackson 2007). As Chun (1996) reiterates, this is important to consider when asking for effective ways for Western lawmakers to create firm protocols through which immigrant RMOBs can protect themselves from potential abuse and mistreatment. As a Western audience we must better inform ourselves about the RMOB industry as it is directly dependent on our economic and legal policies.

Therefore, the women’s displacement further puts them at a disadvantage should any abuse take place, because of the fear that their foreign husband will discover their complaints. Equally, the perceived possibility of deportation, complicated by a mistrustful anxiety towards authorities, as well as the stigma associated with divorce in their native culture, can all contribute to the RMOB’s silence. All of these factors reinforce their propensity to tolerate and not report their mistreatment (Chun 1997). Moreover, as Jennifer Burbich points out, the women’s status as “mail-order brides” positions them in a precarious role vis-a-vis their own ethnic community in a new country (Yakushko & Rajan 2017), leaving the RMOB’s without much of a community to reach out to, for potential support.

There are clearly legitimate reasons to approach the figure of the RMOB as a potential victim in an attempt to navigate the reasons behind the occurrence of abuse, as well as its prevalent underreporting by the victims themselves (Holway 2012). However, it is critical to be aware that the prevalence of investigations into the RMOB’s ties to violence and human right violations is also linked to the media’s portrayal of the “other,” (See Glossary of Terms) serving a specific economic and political agenda (Hall 1997).

As an affluent Western society, we have to be appreciate the significance of our power. We can change the experience of those that are vulnerable to abuse and neglect, by dismantling the hierarchies of power established through centuries of Western ethnocentrism, colonial rule, slavery and domination of immigrants, persons of color and women (Ahmed 2007, Jackson 2007, McClintock 1995, Stoler 2002).

Speaking of power, it is time we heard from the men that become paying and potentially, satisfied customers of the RMOB industry. Thus, I will pass the stage to Jessica Shwartz, who will give us a glimpse into the perspective of her brother Kris, concerning his experience of meeting his own Russian Mail Order Bride.

VIGNETTE THREE: “I Feel Sorry for Her”



Figure 8. Jessica Shwartz. Still from “Undoing the Russian Doll” (2018).

Jessica Shwartz: The Anti-Feminist Domestic Goddess: A Male Fantasy

As discussed in the previous section, RMOBs are being displayed and marketed to fit the myth of a subservient, eager females, in sharp contrast to the liberated Western women, who seem to alienate men. Russian women are conveniently located in a wide and exotic area of Eastern Europe, representing a mysterious Eastern femininity which is now available for the Western male gaze to experience and consume. This is also a myth proliferated by the RMOB industry which firmly places the Russian woman in the position of an exotic and easily controllable product to replace the independent western woman. As articulated by Christine S. Chun:

Marriage brokers rely upon the consumer-husbands' dissatisfaction with American women and the Women's Movement. According to most of the men who seek mail-order brides, ‘American women are too aggressive, too demanding, [and] too devoted to their own careers.’ (p. 1176)

Hence, a Western woman who is outspoken about her needs and desires for a relationship based on equality and respect, does not conform to the patriarchal desires of control, creating a need for women who are focused on committing to a traditional relationship.

In this vignette, I present Jessica Shwartz, a woman whose brother has chosen a mail order bride. Jessica's testimonial describes her brother's search for a life partner, whom he feels he cannot find within his present environment. Hence, the men joining RMOB websites, appear to do so in a quest to seek out women who share their patriarchal values and are different from the ambitious and independent Western female (Heyse 2017, Holway 2012, Welch 2005). Here, it is incumbent to examine the political and psychological factors that support and normalize the Western male's intentions in pursuing an online relationship with a RMOB. In his 2016 article "The Russian Cyber-Bride as Geopolitical Fantasy," Ian Klinke posits that the desire for foreign conquest, combined with the fear of losing their traditional masculinity pushes Western men to seek a woman from the far away, mysterious land of Russia. This raises the question as to whether the RMOB industry reinforces the idea that Western men do not need to adapt to the feminist movement that would require them to view and treat women as complete equals.

Jessica's comments raise a number of points concerning her brother's commitment to marry his RMOB. Her concerns that perhaps her future sister-in-law could be connected with criminal activity, may be founded in her exposure to mass media's portrayals of manipulative and cunning RMOBs, as demonstrated by Maighan Markelle's segment. As analyzed by Gina Welch in "To Have and to Hold down" (2005), one troubling discourse that emerges in the online forums frequented by the male customers of RMOB websites, is the "blame the victim" ideology. This frame of thinking appears to stem from the men's fear that their Russian brides are only using them to get a green card (Welch 2005). Thus, the power dynamics manifesting as support and empathy among the men, de-legitimize the numerous domestic violence allegations, and worse, insinuate that these are only a ploy for immigrant women to fool the western authorities and take advantage of their new benefits. Jessica Shwartz seems to believe that male customers can easily fall prey to manipulative RMOBs, who are only after monetary support or a potential move overseas.

Additionally, Ms. Shwartz's worries about her brother's expectations of his future wife, uncomfortably connect to Jennifer Burbich's research on the violence inflicted on some RMOBs. Hence, as the men invest a large sum of money, time and energy into pursuing and eventually

acquiring their chosen bride, the motivation to abuse their new foreign partners may result from the shattering of their anticipation of a docile wife, as their new bride becomes more comfortable and assumes her independence (Holway 2012).

The subject of feminism is a very important consideration in critically examining the success of the RMOB business. In her analysis of the letters written by Western men to Russian mail order brides, Johnson (2007) draws attention to their descriptions of Western women as ‘feminazis.’ A blend of “feminists” and “Nazis,” this term is employed to explain and demonstrate the men’s distaste and fear of the new, liberated and self-determined women that they encounter in the West. Evidently, this derogatory and dangerous blend of words, creates a discourse that paints a false idea of what feminism is and how it affects Western women. Jessica Shwartz is unaware that many RMOBs consider female liberation and independence as unfeminine and in direct opposition to family values and classic gender roles, and mostly feel dissociated from the movement as a whole (Holway 2012, Johnson 2007). As demonstrated by the male protagonists featured in “Love Me” (see previous vignette) the men who complain that Western women are not interested in a relationship or building a family, are using the women’s liberation movement as an excuse to explain their single status as well as their refusal to find a partner in their country (Holway 2012, Johnson 2007).

Stuart Hall’s seminal reflections on the nature of the representation of the other in visual media (Hall 1990), is useful here, (See Glossary of Terms) as, despite the women’s Caucasian appearance, their depiction in the media is that of an exotic, foreign body, rooted in their ethnic history. Thus, the RMOB figure enters the Western audience’s psyche as either dangerous, or compliant and ready to give her potential husband exactly what he is looking for, positioning the RMOB into one side of the binary as either a femme fatale or a perfect housewife. Another layer in the binary construction is the Russian woman as the “good” traditional counterpart to the “feminazi,” liberated, Western woman. At the same time, the Western male fantasy of a mysterious, domesticated woman is equally connected to our society’s deep rooted racism and fear of the “Other.” The Russian woman may appear exotic, but will nonetheless offer a Western man Caucasian offspring (Johnson 2007).

Through obtaining ownership of the exotic Russian woman who still lives in the past, Western men can regain what they feel has been taken from them: the trope of the domesticated, available and subordinate female (Klinke 2016). As Foucault has observed, power is productive

in that it influences how we act and are acted upon. In order to understand how to change its effects, we must dismantle it at its core, interrogating the way power is enacted every day, observing its effects, from the nucleus of the discourse outwards (Foucault 1981). It is in looking for and attending to untold stories within the RMOB world, that we can challenge the construction of oppressive power structures that make its existence possible and unquestioned by the majority of the Western world.

How does discourse conceal certain stories (Foucault 1981), while making some voices intelligible to us as an audience and as consumers of information? In the case of the Western male, the discourses that would normally be hidden, appear more evident in online RMOB forums, where anonymity gives way to a new style of self-expression (Klinke 2016). As one may expect, the reasons for men to go “wife-shopping” online in the first place, may be that some, if not most, of these men find it challenging to attract a partner. This difficulty could be due to their physical appearance, financial insecurity, temper or character (Lawton & Kallister 2011). This image of the Western male outcast, comes alive in the portrayals of men we see in Shannon O’Rourke’s film “*In The Name of Love*”(2002), as well as in “*DOCS: Diary Of A...Mail Order Bride*” (2009). In both documentaries, we meet men who are either older, physically unattractive, or socially awkward, while they reiterate their solitude and desire for a traditional wife. Their self-description often contradicts the picture they paint in their online profiles, or in interviews, creating a false idea of their character and intentions. Shalei Holway (2012:4) speaks to this phenomenon, when she writes:

In order to understand why an American man would want to use an IMB to find a wife, it is crucial to understand who exactly these men are in the first place. Studies conducted by various organizations generally agree that the consumer-husbands are usually white, much older than the bride they choose, politically conservative, frustrated by the Women’s Movement and socially alienated. Moreover, 57 percent of male clients have experienced divorce (Chun 1996; Scholes). More linguistically biased research claims that many of these men “are social misfits... [men who] drink too much; some beat their wives and treat them little better than slaves” (Villapando 325).

Jessica Schwartz echoes this observation, when she mentions that her brother Kris is quite reclusive, and spends a lot of his time alone. In further stating that she believes that Kris has not given Canadian women enough of a chance, Jessica paints a picture of a lonely, anti-social and stubborn man. Kris' lifestyle is well-served by his access to a cyber catalogue full of eligible brides, answering his dated and conservative idea of a family unit.

With the growth of online worlds, modern Russian women have become active members of the global cyberspace, and can appear easily accessible to the male Western consumer, while retaining their distance and exoticism. Thus, the male gaze can degrade Russia by feminizing it, and situating its online brides within existing gradations of Western power. As men are surfing and taking advantage of online RMOB catalogues, forums, advertisements and chat rooms, they are infiltrating and virtually controlling Russian female bodies through shopping for the exotic woman that lives inside a "RMOB" avatar. As Ian Klinke maintains: "The Russian cyber-bride functions as an ideal fantasy (...) that seems initially accessible and conquerable but that is nonetheless elusive – the slippery substance of Easternness itself" (p.193). Repeatedly calling the RMOB a "Cyber-Bride" in his text, Klinke himself has created an avatar which dehumanizes and proliferates the mythology of the eastern "Other," in the process classifying (Foucault 1976) her as a commodity.

Stereotypes of Russian women created by the popular media and Western culture in general, strongly contribute to the idealized and often unattainable male beliefs concerning RMOBs, essentially placing the commodified, hopeful Russian brides, as the answer to all of the modern Western man's unmet needs and desires. Consequently, the RMOB business model uses this fantasy of the domestic princess in its marketing strategy (Holway, Heyse 2017, Yakushko & Rajan 2017). With this in mind, let us finally explore the RMOB phenomenon from the perspective of those holding the strings in this carefully arranged business platform, the agencies themselves.

VIGNETTE FOUR:
“Get thee to a Mail-Order-Bride Website”



Figure 9. Svetlana Campbell. Still from “Undoing the Russian Doll” (2018).

Svetlana Campbell: Visions from the RMOB webpages

Having explored the voices of the academia, the media and the men, I now introduce you to Svetlana Campbell (née Rubleva), a fictitious former RMOB, turned owner of the successful *Svetlana Love Agency*. She guides us through the ways the RMOB websites create and maintain the structure of their highly lucrative business. Svetlana welcomes us into the virtual world that makes this very project possible and needed. It is through computer screens, that today’s RMOB catalogues come to life and offer the Russian women as an extravagant but accessible commodity to the Western male consumer. For the past two decades the industry has especially flourished as a direct result of technological growth and network accessibility across the world (Merriman 2012). There are presently close to 150,000 women listed in the cyberspace, of which Eastern European women represent a large percentage, with over 119,000 RMOBs listed on close to 500 websites (Zabyelina 2009: 90).

The successful role of the RMOB as a glamorous and exotic toy was originally conceived

and is continually disseminated through the agencies' effective online marketing structure. The capitalistic constructs supporting a gratuitous display of women's bodies in online marriage catalogues, conceal the fact that the women behind these images are more than the often superficial and degrading avatars of Russian sex-bombs, which they often effectively display.

The specific marketing frame that is connected to the RMOB platform, glamorizes women's bodies and commodifies their traits, personality and life experience, in order to fit the expectations of Western men (Holway 2012). As seen through Jessica Shwartz's story in the previous chapter, the male RMOB customers' discourse in online MOB forums often demonstrates their desire for traditional female partners, a desire that the RMOB sites effectively target with their marketing of RMOBs. Therefore, if the American or Canadian woman is liberated, outspoken and career-oriented, their Russian alternative must be subservient, timid and focused on being a wife and mother to her Western man (Welch 2005).

The Western media's representation of the Mail Order Bride phenomenon often features discriminatory, sexist and ethnocentric portrayals of the figure of the MOB in pop culture. In their text "Mail-order brides' in popular culture: Colonialist representations and absent discourse" (2011), Bonnie Zare and S. Lily Mendoza focus in on the "selling point" of the RMOB as the lesser-than, weak figure, devoid of self-determination, choice and autonomy:

In particular, we hope that the unpacking of representational politics around this population may contribute to the interrogation of what bell hooks (2001) terms the ideology of 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' as it finds articulation in the 'mail-order' bride's survival saga performed on the global stage. Representations, in and of themselves, are powerful." (p. 3)

As exemplified by Svetlana who is focused on marketing her clients according to the demands and desires of her customers, the MOB business is a profit-driven global platform that exploits different cultural stereotypes in order to perpetrate the myth of the "exotic woman." For example the Asian and Colombian MOB websites follow closely behind the Russian market, feeding from the established stereotypes that portray Asian women as docile and Latin women as sexually adventurous (Chun 1996). Russian women, however, are displayed as a coveted mix of sexually available and family oriented women (Chun 1996, Zare & Mendoza 2011).

For example, one of the top results for RMOB websites on Google, is Russian Cupid

(www.russiancupid.com) and upon visiting it, it becomes obvious that the company has alternate sites in many countries, such as ColombianCupid, ChinaLoveCupid, CaribbeanCupid and so on. This is thus a global business tapping into the market of exotic females around the world.

**Welcome to
A Volga Girl**
The Site That Works For YouClient Support is our Specialty!

CLICK HERE

ANNOUNCEMENT: Currently we only accept PayPal payments. Please contact Elena (Helen), A Volga Girl's Owner, at helen@volgagirl.com

as seen on
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

7-8482-708363 (RU)
admin@volgagirl.com

RECENT SITE UPDATE: December 31, 2017

Login New Users

Home
Main Photo Gallery
Success Gallery
Search Engine
Free Men's Catalog
Order Page
Shopping Cart
Contact Us

Select Language

Figure 10. Welcome Page. Screenshot from Avolgagirl.com

Current successful RMOB websites, such as Russian Cupid, as well as Russian Woman and A Volga Girl, all offer consumers an opportunity to first create a free profile, promising their new client to be “matched” with what is advertised as a hub for 1.5 million singles, as in the case of Russian Cupid. Scrolling down the websites pages, are testimonials that expose the visitor to various success stories.

Keep up the good work. Sincerely, Mauricio and Marina

“ Hello, team Russian Cupid! Thank you for your reply. Yes, I would like to share my story with other members and newcomers from the website, to inspire them to do the same. Here goes, my article is this: -----
- "I met Marina just 2 months after joining the RussianCupid website. It was love at first sight, as she was exactly the kind of woman I was looking for. We moved from private website messages to e-mails, then Skype **read more >>** ”

Mau

Figure 11. Success Story Banner. Screenshot from RussianCupid.com

These websites also offer a “blog” page, where users can read free advice on safe and successful online “dating” or on finding a Russian wife. The membership is free of course, which is a great marketing technique, and when reading the terms of use, we find out that a paid membership is required for extra services, which aren’t specified, but alluded to, such as instant

video messaging and access to translated messages. Does this mean that a non-paying subscriber, can only send messages to other users, and not be able to receive their translated response unless they start a paid membership? One needs to become a member, in order to find out what an “upgraded” membership entails. Regardless of the websites often being marketed as a dating service, the women are welcome to join and use all of its features free of charge.

“Russian mail order brides - they are beautiful, intelligent and men simply love everything about them. Hundreds of men from across the world create a profile on RussianCupid.com, hoping to find a beautiful Russian woman to date and to marry. With over half a million profiles of Russian women, finding love is easier when you’re on RussianCupid.com.”

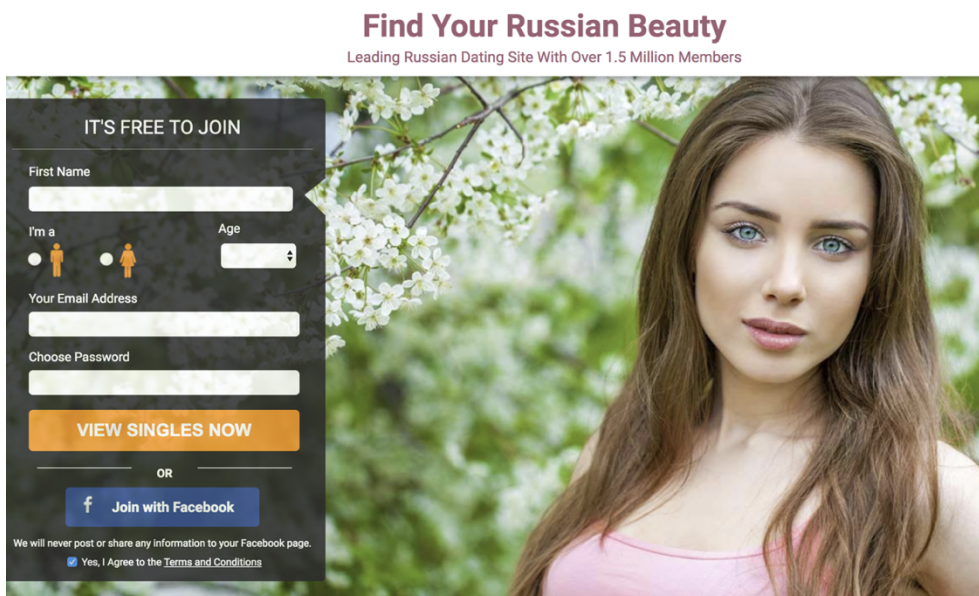


Figure 12. Welcome Page. Screenshot from RussianCupid.com

The above is just one of the many “informative” quotes that are strategically placed on the website. It is peculiar that this specific online space is setup to look like a dating website, and the emphasis on security is forefront. Its soft, romantic colors draw one in, offering a relaxing kaleidoscope of pictures and banners, donning pink and green hues. The main pages are the same in terms of visual content, with a beautiful and polished young Russian woman staring into the camera. She is made up but has a very “wholesome” look. Her picture appears next to a search bar for both men and women and a list of female profiles appears below. A video promoting the

website shows the process of how one can become a client and find a Russian wife. The steps are simple: join, surf, choose, pay, connect and communicate.

Svetlana's boutique agency follows suit to the hundreds of virtual catalogues that display the women's pictures and descriptions in their profiles. Similar to other dating sites, some have a number of amateur shots, while others just feature a professional headshot. The RMOB's profiles are split between the women's self-description and what they are looking for (RussianCupid.com, RussianWoman.com) in a partner. There is always a tagline calling out to the potential visitor. Akin to a dating site, the women's interests are displayed like hashtags on the side with their profile pages being a blend of physical and personal characteristics. Some disturbing fields offer the possibility to the women to display themselves in a very objectifying manner, including providing details on their body measurements. Most leave these blank. This is more reminiscent of a modeling agency's website/marriage agency than a dating site. As Svetlana reiterates, she works with the women as closely as the men, maintaining that she curates their profiles in a specific way to fit the market demands, and offers them the best chance at being selected by a potential groom.

Upon a closer look, it becomes clear that women's actual experience of entering the world of online matchmaking in Russia, involves their unfortunate obligation to fit a commercial niche. Their visual profiles and initial "autobiographical" letter are intended to tempt male visitors to become paying customers if they wish to gain access to the women's full profiles and contact information. As depicted in Shannon O'Rourke's *In The Name of Love*, women who are considering entering the industry, will often meet with agency's management. The process by which the women's online profiles are often controlled and carefully scripted by the agencies must be explored as one of the major drivers behind the industry's sexist and patriarchal depictions of their female clients as one-dimensional catalogue pieces.

Figure 13. RMOB Profile Page. Screenshot from Elenamodels.com

The screenshot shows a profile for Ekaterina, 29, from Tomsk, Russia. The profile includes a main photo, a 'Like Photo' button, and a '36% response rate' gauge. The 'About' section lists various personal details:

About	
Profile Id	E2147589145
Star sign	Libra
Height	170 cm / 5'6"
Weight	58 kg / 127 lbs
Eye Color	Green
Hair Color	Blond
Hair Length	Very Long
Ethnicity	White/European
Marital status	Divorced
Children	Daughter, 2014
Wants Children	Yes
Education	University
Profession	Lawyer
Occupation	Lawyer
Religion	Christian
Smoking	No
Drinking	Socially

The 'I Am Looking For A Man' section lists:

Age	33 to 43
Ethnicity	NA

The fact that that these companies use a commercial model to sell Eastern European women’s profiles to Western male buyers, may appear less precarious to both parties. The structure of the many websites that appear on Google following a specific search for a “Russian Mail Order Brides,” whether or not these sites are officially associated with the Mail Order Bride Industry, remains the same. The online archives of women’s physical attributes and the RMOBs blatant need for a Western prince charming, always display visually provocative photographs of sensual Russian women next to inviting banners, search boxes and success stories to entice first-time visitors.

By incorporating strategically worded slogans into the visual layout of their online structure, the RMOB industry intends to address the mistrust that often exists among their customers, as noted by Petra Heyse in her 2017 ethnographic article investigating such sites. Referring to the language on one such site, she writes:

... ‘real Russian women,’ The adjective ‘real’ suggests that there are also ‘unreal’ Russian women, incorporating a discourse on scams and fake profiles that figure in public debates on matchmaking sites advertising women from former soviet countries. (...) Testimonials of happy couples are regular argumentative strategies that lend a sense of realness to the transactions and enable customers to identify with successful matchmaking stories. (...) communicating the ‘realness’ of the women

behind the profiles is commercially of crucial importance (p. 5).

The focus on increasing trust and maintaining an image of authenticity within the virtual world of matchmaking is a significant element constructed solely for the benefit of male “customers” (Heyse 2017). The landing page of RussianWoman.com for instance, is a catalogue of mostly young, scantily dressed women, calling out to the potential male customer with headlines like: “I am not one million dollars but I can become your Jackpot” and “Real man, where are you?” displayed next to their pictures.

In the world of RMOB websites, there exists a very strategic and well-structured advertising agenda in place. Some RMOB agencies orchestrate the process of creating their catalogue of women, targeted at enticing and reassuring prospective buyers of a good quality product. For Svetlana’s agency it means coaching and facilitating a specific dialogue between her clients. Like some agencies, she directs her female applicants with prompting questions and instructions by providing a template to guide the women on properly advertising their personality and life (Heyse 2017). After the female clients follow a specific blueprint in order to create their “auto-biographical” presentation letter, it is then adapted and translated by so-called “translators,” who, as noted by Petra Heyse (2017) are a hybrid of matchmakers, marketers, coaches and interpreters serving the agency's agenda.

On the subject of matchmaking, it is important to note that the agency owners will often sell coaching services to both their female and male clients, just as Svetlana Love does through all three of her three business locations in Florida, Montreal and Moscow, respectively. In what could be considered a preview of what a Skype session with Svetlana would look like, we can glimpse her energy as the former RMOB shares her story and advice to her prospective clients, stating that the men and women they work with are vetted. She is following the business model that offers a multi-service virtual dating website and marriage agency, while also moonlighting as a tour guide and online store manager. The agency owner is the brand’s spokesperson and the face that represents the happiness, success and security offered by her/his business. Svetlana encourages her male customers to explore all of the services her business offers, including an investment in a trip to meet their prospective RMOB in person.

Elena's Models — Membership Options

Elena's Models offer a great system to establish a relationship with Russian, Ukrainian and Eastern European women, and move it quickly from dating online to the real world.

All our membership packages are transparent and include unlimited communication. You are welcome to share your contact information and exchange as many mails, [chats](#) and [video chats](#) as you wish, with NO extra charges. Platinum and Ultimate packages also allow you to instantly download direct emails addresses and phone numbers of women.*



Compare Membership Plans		Choose a Plan Now!		
Features	Gold From \$19.00 per month	Platinum From \$58.25 per month	Ultimate From \$99.58 per month	
Send Expression of Interest (EOI)	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	
Send Unlimited Mail	50 contacts included	Unlimited	Unlimited	
View ALL additional photos of women	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	
View Videos	Unlimited with your 50 contacts	Unlimited	Unlimited	
Instant Chat Messaging	Unlimited with your 50 contacts	Unlimited	Unlimited	
Live Video Chat		Unlimited	Unlimited	
Direct Contact Details		Unlimited	Unlimited	
Profile Verification			5 profiles	
8- Hour Coaching Audio MP3			8- Hour Coaching Audio MP3	
Coaching Manual & 2 Workbooks PDF			Coaching Manual & 2 Workbooks PDF	

Figure 14. Membership Information Page. Screenshot from Elenamodels.com

Michel Foucault's (1981) thoughts on discourse formation and its further interiorization in the minds of those consuming and using it, are critical to consider when looking at the RMOB websites, which provide a broad range of sexist and essentialist representations of Russian women online. These portraits are then shaped as the foundation of Western perceptions of single Russian women who are willing to leave their whole life behind in their pursuit of a foreign husband. As the women are marketed in extremely sexualized, objectified ways, their images are constructed to attract men that enter the relationship from a powerful and righteous perspective of a buyer and benefactor (Jackson 2007).

The marketing and discursive strategies used on RMOB websites further reinforce the commodification and stereotyping of the Eastern European women, producing a dangerous narrative of purchasing and therefore owning Russian female bodies by the Western males. The use of derogatory and sexist slogans is common practice, as demonstrated by Yuliya Zabyelina (2009) in her article, "Mail-Order Brides: Content Analysis of Eastern European Internet Marriage Agencies." She comments on this practice in reference to one virtual RMOB page:

... an image on GetMarried- Now.com presents a Russian woman in a swimming suit

posing as if she were a model. The caption underneath says ‘Will I offend the American women because I am not overweight?’ Such a statement plays on the stereotype that American women are overweight and that Russian brides are, therefore, ‘better’. Other inscriptions next to the images of Russian brides reinforce a different set of predispositions: ‘Russia is famous for good sex and crime. I don’t do crime!’ (p. 96)

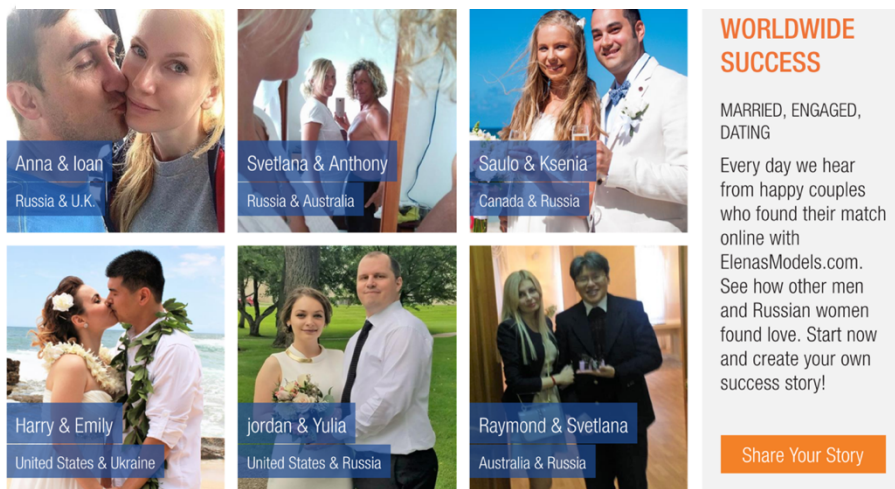
Within the RMOB catalogues, women are being showcased in a variety of unsettling ways. The emphasis is always on their physical attributes, availability, and eagerness to please a man. For example, the RMOB profiles on AVolgaGirl.com display basic physical and personal information about the woman, as well as her description of the man she is looking for. These latter descriptions can come off as racist and superficial, with one laconic example reading: “33-45. He is strong, confident, reliable, he will respect and love me. Not dark-skinned.” In a clever marketing trick, the woman’s profile also shows how many times her address has been purchased, akin to a popularity contest or the likes on a Facebook page. Below the RMOB’s main page, the visitor is invited to select and purchase one or many gifts to send her, should she catch the visitor’s eye. The offerings range from flowers, chocolates and stuffed animals, to perfume and Victoria Secret’s gift certificates. Men are thus encouraged to learn that Russian women are susceptible to gifts and treats, further reinforcing the idea of a patriarchal male-female power dynamic and traditional gender roles, which may have led the customers to browse a MOB catalogue to begin with.

Mrs. Svetlana Campbell’s (a.k.a. Svetlana Love) testimonial concerning her fruitless search for love in Russia and subsequent success with a RMOB agency, is aimed at establishing trust and a belief in her expertise for those that visit her website. Following suit with the majority of RMOB websites, Svetlana’s sharing of her own success story and reassuring her potential customers, creates an intimate space in which the audience and prospective clients may feel inclined to believe that the RMOB model will work for them. As the agency owners reiterate their personal experience, it may appear that their sole intention is to help one find a soul mate. Hence, the audience may forget that, despite the dramatic testimonials and emotionally charged language used on the websites, the visitor is engaging with a multi-billion dollar, unregulated online business, running on the future sales of carefully marketed Russian brides. The virtual world of RMOBs benefits and supports the exploitation of Russian women, reinforcing racial and cultural stereotypes and facilitating the commodification of female bodies through their

marketing in cyberspace for consumption by Western male consumers (Zabyelina 2009).

Svetlana claims that that she helps her clients find the perfect match. In the RMOB world, the women’s self-representation is sometimes taken over by the agencies and adapted to suit the target market. Here, RMOBs are coached in a way that shapes the language in their profiles and subsequent conversations with a prospective suitor, while they receive instructions on how to get, maintain and deepen a prospective man’s interest in a very competitive environment, where thousands of Russian women are all desperate to “catch” that one man (Heyse 2017). Agencies often start with specific instructions guiding their prospective RMOBs to create their profiles to suit a certain myth of “Russian femininity” (Heyse 2017: 11), which is intended to meet the expectations of the Western customers, and is then curated through the agency restructuring and

Figure 15. Success Testimonials. Screenshot from Elena'smodels.com



translation of the women’s writing. The troubling absence of authentic communication between the RMOB and the man that chooses to pay for her contact information, is echoed in Jessica Schwartz’s speech (see previous vignette) concerning her worries that her brother’s interaction with Aliona had been tampered with by Svetlana Love Agency’s translators.

Jessica’s worries are quite reasonable. In some cases, women are instructed to focus on the man and his interests, and to never assume control of their virtual communication (Heyse 2017). This is congruent with the mass media’s tendency to reinforce the myth of female eagerness, submissiveness and deep commitment to a man’s happiness and goals. RMOB agencies have tremendous power in presenting their clients in the way that they see fit, which play into and reinforce global structures of Western male desire and dominance over the foreign female commodities that comport to the ideal of a patriarchal relationship.

Despite her ever present smile and energetic delivery, Svetlana represents the deceptive facade of the RMOB industry. Through visual and textual marketing strategies, careful curation of their content and mediating the budding relationships between the female “objects” and potential customers, the RMOB websites are a market with little to no rules to protect the women that resort to their services. The problematic discourse used by online marriage agency websites expose oppressive hierarchies of Western power. Further, the RMOB online spaces present a modern, technologically facilitated business model that builds narratives around domesticity, female subordination, patriarchal gender roles and abuse. This is complicated by stories of successful unions between transnational partners and the historical construction of the female experience in post-communist Russia. The MOB websites’ content is where power can be traced, as they are the birthplace of specific discursive formations that are later utilized by the media in their portrayals of the phenomenon.

How then are we to engage with our perceptions of the kaleidoscope of Russian women displayed on the RMOB websites, now that their structure appears more visible?

I believe that there is no one answer and no one way of identifying the motivations and personal situations of the players engaged in the industry’s often dangerous and sometimes deceptive game of virtual matchmaking. However, bringing our attention to a voice that is not given much space in academic or media coverage is instrumental in provoking our curiosity and perhaps inspiring those that hear it to intervene in those areas of the RMOB businesses that have the potential to hurt the women involved in it.

In reviewing the literature and in creating these vignettes, I wish to address the lack of scholarship and research that bases itself on an empathetic and creative study of these women’s individual experiences. Such an approach would work well to dismantle stereotypes in the academic literature and in media representations of Russian Mail Order Brides and humanize them by attending to their experiences, fears, needs and ambitions, within the context of globalization, feminism, immigration and capitalism in Russia. To remedy this, I hope to inspire my audience to question the RMOB phenomenon by hearing about it from a Russian Mail Order Bride herself. Without further ado, allow me to now bring you into my friend Aliona’s world, as she explores and lives through the RMOB experience in her own way, sharing it with us through three vignettes: “*There is Nothing Here*”, “*A Life Worth Leaving*” and “*I Can Learn to Love You*”.

VIGNETTE FIVE, SIX & SEVEN:

“There is Nothing Here”, “A Life Worth Leaving” and “I Can Learn to Love You”



Figure 16. Aliona Korotkova. Still from “Undoing the Russian Doll” (2018).

Aliona Korotkova: Choosing Love. Single Russian Female

While the RMOB business is a marketplace where thousands of women seem to superficially sell themselves as eager brides, a majority of these hopeful candidates are educated, attractive and well-rounded; their profiles hovering between authenticity and clever marketing guidelines, as I discussed above. Now Aliona will guide us through her journey in three vignettes, which bring us into the reality of the single, modern Russian woman, which is mostly absent from the various attempts to analyze the RMOB phenomenon, as demonstrated by Maighan Markelle’s interviewees, Jennifer Burbich, Jessica Shwartz, and Svetlana Campbell as shown in the preceding vignettes.

Aliona is leaning on a concrete wall outside the Moscow apartment that she shares with her mother. Through her voice, I am coming to this analysis from the perspective of a feminist

artist, exploring my own “situated knowledge” as I try to answer Donna Haraway’s (1988: 581) excellent call to a conscientious and vulnerable look at the way one observes, judges, and draws conclusions from the experience of another human being. The literature does not offer introspective and empathetic insight into the inner experience of a contemporary Russian woman who considers becoming a RMOB. A limited view of the modern Russian life is offered in some documentary films, and in my vignettes, I seek to offer an alternative to the figure created in them, while filling in the gap within the Maighan Markelle, Jennifer Burbich’s and Jessica Schwartz’ views on the human being behind the Russian Mail Order Bride they explore.

A will to truth (Foucault 1981) may be achieved by introducing a new story of the reasons for a Russian woman to parade herself in a potentially compromising way in an online catalogue of flesh. As a woman who may have found herself presently living in Moscow, I intend to bring forth a number of important cultural, social and legal elements that permeate modern Russian life. Some of these factors are greatly responsible for the RMOB industry’s thriving existence. It is the cultural and social reality of the single Russian woman that makes space for a new role for the RMOB to occupy: that of an educated single woman with self-determination, intellectual depth, realistic dreams and a strong intention to self-realize in a way that is authentic to her life experience.

Although it can be easy to assume that the RMOB women are simply trying to run away from their problematic life in Russia, I must delve into the many reasons behind their decision to do so, as they relinquish all ties to their support network, profession, culture and language (Holway 2012). One of the main reasons cited by RMOBs for deciding to advertise their search for love online, is the very low number of available men in Russia (Holway 2012, Johnson 2007). As Holway (2012: 7) notes, the reality is that “there are about 4 million more women of marriageable age in Russia than men.” This imbalance creates a daily power struggle for Russian women, who have to search, attract, connect with and keep a male partner. Thus, the men have their pick of a wide variety of interested women, while the latter have to compete with one another based on their age, appearance and family situation.

Aliona lives in Moscow, which illustrates how far-reaching the RMOB industry is, as it affects women in many different economic and social environments. The critical factors that may seriously affect their ability to attract and maintain a serious relationship, which includes their age, previous marriages and children, apply to all Russian women. Living in a big city does not

guarantee more success in having a traditional family, or a better quality of life.

One of the critical enabling factors of the RMOB industry is the women's inability to find healthy Russian men that they will not only potentially like, but also, be able to depend upon. An alcoholism epidemic, as well as mandatory army service, which often results in war deployment, alongside severe unemployment among the modern Russian male population, are all critical elements that contribute to the scarcity of acceptable male partners (Holway 2012). Thus the RMOB agencies' are able to continually recruit a variety of prospective MOB's in Russia. Existing Russian men's behavior towards the women around them no doubt contributes to the RMOB's feeling the obligation to please and prove herself as the perfect wife to any prospective male partner. Gender roles are very entrenched in Russia, and the woman's place has always been and is perceived to be in the home, serving the ultra-masculine breadwinner (Pedraza 2016).² Despite the fact that RMOB's are often well-educated women who are looking for stability with a progressive partner (Yakushko & Rajan 2017), the majority, like our heroine Aliona and one of Ericka Johnson's research subjects, Valentina (2007), may believe that they will not find a man in whom they are truly interested. For these women to put themselves online and become a part of a catalogue for Western men, takes a lot of courage, and a firm belief that an eligible partner simply does not exist in Russia.

Listening to Aliona speak about her situation in Moscow, one can discern notes of her sadness and frustration at the fact that she feels excluded from the ranks of eligible brides in her social circle. She feels that her inability to meet or keep a man is mostly due to her age. The notion that after their mid-twenties women are considered "old maids," and are categorized as unmarriageable by their immediate social circle and any prospective men they meet, is a sad cultural reality that permeates Russian society, and is a salient point in the literature (Holway 2012, Johnson 2007). For example, one storyline in "*In The Name of Love*" follows an American man's pursuit of Inna, a much younger divorced single mother, who openly talks about her life being so dark that she has contemplated suicide. Living with her two children in her mother's one bedroom apartment, Inna is struggling to keep afloat despite working full-time, at a respectable

² Russian men's masculinity is aptly summarized by Professor Vladimir Paperny halfway through "*In The Name of Love*" (2002), when he states that "This traditional role (...) to a large degree, it still exists (...) the level of their income is not such where you safely create a family and raise a family."

job. “I share a bed with my daughter”, she tells us incredulously. Here, we are shown yet another Russian phenomenon, which could be almost inconceivable to a Western audience: a Russian husband may completely abandon his children, avoiding any legal repercussions, as in Inna’s case. For the single Russian woman who finds herself abandoned by her former partner, the prospect of attracting a foreign man who is also open to welcoming her children is tremendous.

Notably, divorcées are also a big part of the market. In Russia, should a woman marry at a socially acceptable age, the stigma of divorce is yet another circumstance through which many women find themselves ostracized by the eligible male population (Johnson 2007). Once separated from or abandoned by her husband, a Russian woman’s chances of finding a partner decrease dramatically, especially if she has any children (Holway 2012, Jackson 2007). Stories of Russian men who leave their families without any support are very common, as the male population will always be in demand with the opposite sex. Their children will provide yet another reason for men to shun them, as Russian men are known for not being interested in becoming adoptive fathers, and will often seek out a partner who will offer him “his own” children (Holway 2012, Jackson 2007).

In her second appearance in front of us, Aliona demonstrates her excitement in anticipating her meeting with Kris, a man who she feels is searching for the same things as her: specifically a traditional family. Russian females exist within Russia’s cultural and social values (Johnson 2007, Jackson 2007), and a Russian woman’s values may be perceived as old-fashioned by the Western gaze (Feifer 2010). The necessity to marry, have children and maintain a household are all core values ingrained in the Russian female psyche from a very young age, and reinforced by cultural practices as well the authorities in the political and social sphere (Jackson 2007, Johnson 2007). There is tremendous pressure on Russian women to have children in contemporary Russia, while encouraging them to keep working at the same time (Poushkareva 2012). As well, the traditional Russian woman’s role of a housewife and mother is being promoted and celebrated through a series of “femininity schools,” where girls learn how to fulfill their purpose with proper manners, patriarchal value systems and household skills (Pedraza 2016). This reality further supports the marketing strategies and media coverage of the RMOB phenomenon. Being a wife and a mother is intrinsically tied to being a woman in Russia, and is the ultimate driving force behind the majority of RMOBs’ decision to offer themselves up for appraisal by a potential partner from the West (Johnson 2007).

Akin to Elena Voskresenskaya, in *“In The Name of Love”*, Aliona also mentions that she enjoys her work, but is open to leave it in order to focus on her family. She presents as an independent, confident woman who expresses a strong desire to take care of a man and have a traditional family in which she can realize herself as a loving mother and a wife.

In Aliona, we see the self-respect and inner determination that is fully alive in modern Russian women who are open to becoming RMOBs. The reasons for their decisions are often beyond Western comprehension, as a woman’s experience of womanhood in Russia is very different from the way a Western woman can expect to be regarded by both the society at large and the opposite sex. Aliona, and Russian women in general, connect their value and purpose to their ability to take care of a man and continue the family line by having children (Fedorova, Savitskaya & Yakovleva, 2017).

As she meets our attention in the last vignette, Aliona is now almost settled in Laval with Kris, and although she is overwhelmed with the sudden reality of her new life in Quebec, she is committed to her belief in the fact that Kris truly values what she considers most important to her self-realization as a woman. Aliona maintains her desire to gain control of her life by taking action in way that may seem strange or hopeless to others.

Throughout her story, Aliona places a strong emphasis on her idea of purpose. To her, finding someone to care for and creating a family home is central to feeling like she has lived her life fully and not in vain. Modern Russian women choosing the path of online international matchmaking services negotiate their traditional values, the importance of family and a desire for independence and self-realization abroad, all within the context of the international online matchmaking and marriage business. In her final testimonial, Aliona declares that she can “learn to love him.” With this statement she is honestly disclosing that for someone in her situation the goal isn’t some glamorous love affair, nor is it economic gain or the experience of living in a first-world country. For a Russian woman who has lost all hope in feeling like she is desired and valued as a long-term romantic partner and future mother, meeting a man who wants to make her his wife is the ultimate dream.

Here, another critical element to take into account, is the role that the Western media play in the Russian woman’s search for a solid male partner. Provided she cannot find a suitable Russian man, why does she want a Western husband? Women in Russia have access to images of American men who are handsome, strong, forward thinking and supportive of their partners,

creating the phenomenon of, as coined by Stacey Chun, the “Myth of the American Man” (1996: 1175). This myth persistently reaffirms itself through Western entertainment and general media coverage as it is infused in the daily media landscape of the Russian woman. Using this fabricated dream, the marriage agencies enter the scene and make the myth appear real and attainable (Chun 1996). Zoe Lawton and Philip Callister (2011) also mention that the “dream” of Western husband is based on a stereotype created and sold by the media, concluding that:

Large differences in relative incomes, for example between Eastern and Western European countries may have also prompted women to look to Western Europe to find higher income earning partners. Western men began to be marketed (accurately and misleadingly) to women in developing countries as being able to provide more financial security and a higher standard of living. (p. 6)

With Hollywood films and television shows progressively infiltrating the Russian media landscape, Russian female consumers subconsciously conjure unrealistic expectations of the Western men. The RMOB’s fantasy of a perfect male partner often becomes associated with American men by virtue of Russia’s exposure to Western pop-culture (Holway 2012, Lawton & Callister 2011), which as we know, is populated with male superheroes, doting husbands, powerful leaders and charming suitors.

Additionally, in order to fully comprehend the motivations behind finding and attracting a white Western man specifically, it is important to recall the implicit racism that is palpable in Ericka Johnson’s (2007) portrayal of the young Olga and her mother, Anya, in her ethnographic study of RMOBs, where the two women casually admit to only wanting a white partner for Olga. The unfortunate normalcy of racism in Russia is a critical point to address in the RMOB life-experience, as it is connected to the naiveté of the Russian female living in a society that is intolerant to all indications of queerness or otherness. Russian women thus learn to view people of color as incredibly foreign, based on their representations in the popular media that circulates in Russia, in contrast to the glorified images of white Western men who are perceived as the ultimate catch.

Aliona would ask the audience to consider looking at the pictures, videos and articles that one may encounter with a critical eye, bearing in mind that what one sees on the surface of the RMOB industry conceals a multitude of personal stories which may never be told. The avatar of

the Russian Mail Order Bride can be a stigma as well as a passport to a new life, always infused with idealistic dreams, superficial personal profiles, poorly translated courtship letters and a disturbing connection to abuse, deceit and the commodification of female bodies. There is no answer to whether it is ultimately harmful or beneficial. I hope that by exposing my audience to all the different facets of this industry, that they may perhaps be inspired to redefine certain questions concerning the figure of the Russian Mail Order Bride. This might then facilitate a productive intervention into the industry's operations, while offering support and space for the brides themselves to express their fears, needs, motivations and true intentions.

Fade to black.

EPILOGUE

The credits have rolled and the audience can stretch.

I want to thank my readers and the viewers. What you have just read and watched are two expressions of my experiential inquiry into the Russian Mail Order Bride industry as it expresses itself online, in the media and in academic analysis. This research-creation project is ultimately an exploration of my emotional and intellectual conversations with the phenomenon that I originally dismissed as a one-dimensional industry catering to affluent, capricious men and superficial, obnoxious women. However, the process of making this project a reality has allowed me to become more aware of the way that certain ideas take place in our minds, often masquerading as truth, while being only a glimpse of the forest's edge. As I delved deeper into improvising Aliona's story, I felt regret for my original condescending, and limited view of the women that chose to become RMOBs. Hence, in constructing just one hypothetical reality through my research, I want to expose the existence of a variety of stories, all waiting to be heard and articulate their own truth, with all of their contradictions, grey-areas and fluidity.

I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to break the stereotype in my own perception and to challenge it with extensive research, empathetic questioning and self-inquiry which led to the conception of the project with which you have just engaged. To my surprise the written text was as creative an endeavor as the production of the video.

With each of the scenes that comprise the final video performance piece, it was important for me to try on and walk in a variety of shoes. With the media observer, the researcher, the man's sister, and the business owner, the story remained connected to the heroine, a woman who decides to advertise herself and her dreams in an online catalogue, with the intent to leave her life and country behind in order to marry and build a new life in a foreign country with an affluent, Western man, who will invest money and time into making her his wife.

My project is intended to help situate the RMOB as a contested product of Russian-Soviet history, technological developments, globalization and specific cultural values. The submitted screenplay has been written in English; I have, however, performed specific scenes of the video project in Russian, so as to best reflect the style of a "mockumentary." With this work, I want to contest and address the "post-truth" era with contemporary memory archives, while utilizing historical representations and accounts of the Russian female experience in the twentieth and

twenty-first century. I am specifically interested in what is made visible and the invisibility of certain elements of the Russian female body in the media.

The story I wrote and performed is essentially a collage of parts of myself as a researcher, student and artist, with the identity of a foreign single woman from Moscow at my core. As I switch from one female voice to another, I fragment and disrupt the dominant views on the subject of the RMOBs. By contrasting these scenes with the protagonist's story, told by herself, I bring the question back to the reality that there is no simple solution for the situations of the women who are involved in the RMOB business. A Russian woman's life is a very different experience from ours, despite Russia's perceived economic power and cultural wealth. I want this work to be available to a wide audience through a format that is easy to follow and offers a space in which to engage with a female protagonist, who drives the project by taking her voice back from Western academics, media producers and RMOB business owners.

My project touches upon a critical area in the feminist movement and its scholarship. The RMOB industry creates and maintains its power through the dissemination of a specific, ideal female archetype that solidifies the binary between the image of a wholesome, "good" female figure, which the RMOB industry sells to its consumers, and that of the independent and non-traditional woman. Our ever-present patriarchal structures of power benefit from the fantasy of a domesticated, feminine and quiet woman, whose identity is tightly linked to her performance as a mother and a devoted housewife. Meanwhile, the figure of the perfect female partner may in fact contribute to the on-going gender-based violence in traditional relationships, specifically affecting marginalized female bodies, as well as those that find themselves the subjects of Western male desire. It is crucial for my audience to question current discussions around sexual and domestic abuse insofar as it is related to the women's liberation movement. We must acknowledge the law-makers' and the media's lack of concern for the women that do not conform to the stereotypes we are encouraged to respect and support. How can we better hear and create a safe space for the voices of those women that do not wish to be a part of the traditional role assigned to them by our society, and promoted by the mass media?

In the context of the RMOB industry, the first step is for academics, consumers and activists to approach the RMOB beyond the online, marketed "product" that she embodies, and see her as the living, complex, and often silenced woman that she can be. To understand and change the very unsettling MOB industry, which is equally flourishing in Asia and Latin

America, we must start with finding the empathy to accept that we know little of the real motivations driving Russian women to join these online platforms. Perhaps, focusing on seeing the RMOBs as victims is just as futile as assuming they are opportunists or glorified online escorts who have chosen their own fate and are separate from the “innocent” Russian women who choose to live their life as is.

This research-creation is anchored in the imaginary story of my main character, Aliona, and is meant to reflect the optimism, commitment and self-determination I have observed in the many Russian women I have known, studied and researched. Being a reflection of myself, my work is anchored in a belief that an individual’s drive for a purposeful life and self-expression is unique and demands respect from those of us within the social sciences and humanities seeking to study and intervene in the problematic realities of those whom we deem in need of our support.

As my research and personal engagements deepened throughout the project, I found that my academic and artistic practice evolved as well. The desire to support the voice of those women who are not being heard has been the driving element behind my decision to build a performance around my research. Therefore, I hope to add to the existing scholarship by translating my research into a multi-media, live-action project that can be used as an entertaining educational tool, and whose aesthetics fit the contemporary style of sketch performance, vlogging and web-series. As I offer another look into the RMOB industry, I hope to make palpable the misconceptions and judgements that are often made at the expense of paying close attention to the multi-layered life-experience of those we consider others in our immediate reality.

I am expressing my own optimism and hope that some of the women that become RMOBs do find the support and connection they are so desperately seeking. I want to applaud those women that are willing to take the plunge and proudly stand by their decisions. Of course there are those that are involved in this industry that do not relate to Aliona. Her story also may not end well, and that is the open-ending I have purposefully designed so that it leads to further inquiry. There can never be complete certainty or a clear answer to a problem. Sometimes the best and most effective way to intervene and challenge a problematic social issue is to simply pay attention and ask new questions. She too, may enter the devastating world of domestic violence, despite her apparent eagerness to please her new husband.

Thus, with this project, my ultimate hope is to inspire a new line of questions that translate into other salient issues. Most importantly, I hope that a new way of inquiry will afford

a space that is currently lacking in the Western world in order for us to hear the varied experiences of the “Other.” In allowing the figure of the perceived stranger to step out of being an object of analysis and show themselves to be just another human expression of consciousness on this planet, we, as academics, students, artists and socially engaged individuals can create our own little changes from the margins of our own experience.

Blackout.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Key Theoretical Concepts

Discourse and Power:

The work of Michel Foucault is essential in its analysis of discourse and its dissemination within social structures. Foucault's deep investigation and revealing of the way discourse is constructed and implemented in our daily experiences through specific power agendas is a critical concept in any research pertaining to the social and political realities, which we accept as non-negotiable to our survival and development. Whatever is socially accepted as Truth is produced by the political and economic structures which construct and maintain discursive practices around salient social and cultural issues, which in turn produces and reproduces a given society's hierarchical structure. Structures in which the power levels are often difficult to expose result in the insidious categorization, domination, exclusion, silencing and control over those bodies that are deemed disruptive or contrary to the well-being of the people who support the hierarchical power structure. Power moves out from its nucleus as it produces striations which often hide its origin, making it difficult to actively resist the specific agendas behind accepted social rules, rituals, institutions and events. In conducting discourse analysis, social scientists may be able to dismantle oppressive constructs as they are reinforced by the mass media. (Foucault 1976, 1981, Hook 2001).

Representations of The Other:

In his various contributions to the field of cultural studies, Stuart Hall has closely analyzed the Western media's representations of figures considered "other", which often go unquestioned and are widely accepted as truthful by the mass public consumer. Portrayals of human beings belonging to a different ethnicity and religion are most often curated by political agendas and lead to offensive and degrading tropes. The way the Western public first encounters people of foreign origin is often through the media's scripted portrayal of one-dimensional stereotypes, which allow for further construction of the public perception and judgement of those who are positioned as different, exotic, mysterious and potentially threatening. Our assimilation of specific mediated scripts in which persons of color, ethnic and religious minorities are presented as clearly different and in opposition to the values we are encouraged to respect creates

an environment in which our view of, and relationship with others is shaped by the messages we receive through our daily interactions with the visual and textual messages aimed at controlling our behaviors within the context of the Western world. The formation of mediated discourses then informs their production of power in society. This is critical when looking at the representations of the “Other”, as further supporting the productive power of hidden discourses in contemporary media. (Hall 1990, 1997, 2000, 2007a).

Situated Knowledges

A term coined by Donna Haraway in her germinal essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988), *situated knowledge* refers to the personal positioning of the perceiver of a specific subject. Haraway draws attention to the critical importance of acknowledging the specific and unique situation in which every person exists. It is crucial for any researcher, especially one working within a feminist framework, to pay attention to their positioning when looking at and drawing conclusions about the subject of their interest, before investigating it and drawing any categorical conclusions. (Haraway 1998).

Performativity

As presented by Judith Butler, the notion of performativity explores how society and culture create certain roles which bodies enter into, without realizing the power of said roles to influence decisions, social positioning and self-image. Butler pays specific attention to our performance of gender and its relationship to political and social hierarchies in our daily lives. In performing our gender, we allow for a controlled social reality to dictate our behavior and self-image. The latter has to be recognized as acceptable by our society, inspiring further actions which reinforce our ideas of how our bodies must exist on the stage of our social conditioning, which we accept as the norm. (Butler 1988, Prins 1998).

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APPENDIX I

“Undoing the Russian Doll”

A Video-play
By Sasha Lipskaia

Vignette 1: *"They Know Nothing"*

FADE IN

Int. Newsroom in Montreal. Evening.

Maighan Markelle is standing in front of a Nighttime Montreal Background.

MAIGHAN

Good evening Montreal, I am Maighan Markelle, and today in the special edition of "Stories From Here" we are looking into a subject closely linked to human trafficking and domestic violence. The Russian Mail Order Bride Industry. This is a multi-billion dollar network that operates online matching Russian women with Western men, who can purchase these girls online as "brides".

Today we are bringing you a story from Montreal... which is currently home to a few successful online agencies, and we want to look into the subject further. We are lucky to have a PhD student doing her research on the subject speak to it, as well as the sister of a man who currently "ordered a Russian Mail Order Bride. From a local agency "Svetlana Love' This business has a facility in Montreal, Florida and Moscow. We are very excited to have spoken to the owner and manager of this agency, herself a former Russian Mail

Order Bride, called Svetlana. She has some great insights into the subject. So...Who are these women? Are they bimbos and sex-kitten's as some of their profiles suggest? Gold Diggers looking to find a rich Western man? Are they victims, running away from their problems? Or are they old-fashioned women looking for a life they cannot find in Russia? We are excited to hear what you think about this, so please follow us on Social Media and let us know!

FADE TO BLACK

Vignette 2: "Let Me Save You"

FADE IN

Int. Concordia University office. Morning.
Jennifer Burbich is sitting by her desk.

JENNIFER

Yes, my name is Jennifer Burbich, I am a PhD student at Concordia, in my third year.

I am currently working on a documentary film about Russian Mail Order Brides, specifically their ties to abuse and marital problems...with their husbands.

(She makes air quotes with her hands)

No of course, there can be happy women in that they get to leave their atrocious life in Russia...but what do

they get here? Often they come with little to no knowledge of English. They are fleeing abuse or situations where they are worth nothing to the men around them. Of course they'll accept any man. And there is little to no regulations in the these quasi-official agencies...Also, they sell this idea of a sex kitten that will do the man's laundry with a smile...and when that is not what happens, we have aggression, abuse, emotional and physical. And these women, they come here with no support- no one to tell them they can seek legal help. They are just so terrified of being deported, and the men they scare them with that. Of course there are happy unions, I am sure...but even at that. The women will always be at the mercy of their husbands. Even in Canada, they will still be apart from the feminist movement, they will be alone. Often, too their ethnic group here, they will look at them sideways...there is so much stigma and labelling them as gold-diggers or bimbos, by Russians who have never investigated the business thoroughly. It is just devastating. So, yes this industry is very unregulated and a space where women get sold and abused, often not even knowing it. I don't know what the alternative would be...a better life

in Russia? I just think that the agencies should not have any legal placement, they should be illegal basically. Of course in my work... I cannot recommend that, as they also offer many women a way out, a way to have a full, safe life also. I cannot disregard that.

FADE TO BLACK

Vignette 3: "I Feel Sorry for Her"

FADE IN

Int. Kitchen Table in a Montreal apartment. Morning. Jessica is sitting in her apartment and drinking coffee, facing the camera.

JESSICA SHWARTZ

Hello, my name Jessica Shwartz, my brother Kris has recently decided to go over to Russia to visit his Russian bride...which is so crazy he has never been anywhere. She is coming next week... Kris has been very reclusive about the process, he is an introvert, doesn't go out much. He is very busy, he works in construction- as a projects manager, so he spends most days with guys or on his own at home, watching Netflix. He tried dating here, I know, I tried to fix him up, ...but he says he doesn't feel like any of the girls he meets- says they are

fake, that they don't care about anything but going out and partying...and that they all want someone to pay for them, but only want to talk about themselves...I tried to help him, I set him up...but he says my friends are too focused on their careers. I don't know if that is true. They just don't want to be dependent on a man...And they want to use their brains, you know?

(she shrugs, apparently frustrated)

Oh, yes so this girl, he says she is perfect, that she wants a family and that she is pretty, kind, he is so happy that she cares about what he wants...He went and visited her last month, and spent a week there. I really don't know how that can be enough time, to me it's crazy. But he says he is in love. I skyped with them both...she seems very timid, she speaks English, but it's not very good- apparently her agency has been translating most of their communication...I mean how does he know they are not lying, and translating things she never said? The whole thing is just weird...I don't blame her, I actually feel sorry for her. She is probably so lost and her life has to be pretty bad. Russian girls are like totally without rights over there...I don't think she means anything bad...but who knows? What if she comes, and she

hates it here? Or she starts acting in a way that he doesn't like...He would be so devastated...And I know I should be optimistic, but what if she is part of some mafia ring? I told him that. He says I don't know her, and, well, that's true. *(She pauses)*

But neither does he. I just hope it works out, I mean I would never do this...To leave everything...She is going to be alone here, and she won't have a job...I don't know what she will do.

FADE TO BLACK

Vignette 4: "Get thee to a Mail-Order-Bride Website"

FADE IN

Int. "Svetlana Love Agency" Montreal headquarters.
Afternoon.

Svetlana Campbell is standing in her office, surrounded by traditional Russian paraphernalia.

SVETLANA

Well, Hello!

My name is Svetlana Campbell, and I manage Svetlana Love one of the premiere boutique dating agencies in Montreal, "Svetlana Love" which has offices in Florida and in Montreal. We are very proud to say that so far we have helped a lot of couples to find love! I myself

know what it is like, as I was alone, sad and desperate in Russia.

I myself almost gave up on my personal life, but after listing my profile online, I found the best, most loving man, Bill, who owns this agency with me. Now he helps me run my business, well our business, and he is an amazing.

We offer help with the profile setup, getting the right photographs, and of course videos and translation of your letters! I offer, coaching and support and real advice. Also, we have English courses and services to make sure our ladies are prepared and know how to find the right man, that know the culture and needs of the men that want to meet them. We also make sure our men are joining for the right reasons...that they understand the gift that a Russian woman can offer him...her vulnerability, her kindness and her warmth. I myself was alone and desperate in Moscow, until my husband Bill has met me and brought me here! Now we own this agency to help others find love, just like we did!

So if any of you or your friends are needing some help...

You can find us at SvetlanaLove.com, and join for free.

I guarantee that they will be presented in the most flattering and honest way!

(she laughs)

Let me know if you have more questions!

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN

Sasha's interception of the narrative.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN

Vignette 5: "There is Nothing Here"

Fade-in from Black

Exterior. Moscow. Morning.

Aliona is standing next to a brick building.

ALIONA

So... hello my name is Aliona Korotkova, I live in Moscow and I am 28... and so I ...like... got registered in this online virtual meeting, dating agency, where men from England, Canada and the US are introduced to Russian women. So I went there and filled out the forms and all of my information, and there was a photo-session ...and the agency told me what to write and how to show myself properly, how to pose...which is normal, I understand, they know best. And then as soon as someone starts talking to me, they will get e, they will see me. And so I am a teacher...I was married before, he left after 2 years, started seeing someone else, someone younger. I don't have kids...and that is very sad. I live her with my mom, and both of us feel

an emptiness, she raised me alone, my father left us when I was a baby. So she understands me...at first she was confused when I started this whole thing...but now she gets it...I mean as a woman, what will be left of me in twenty years?

If no one is there for me to love, to take care of? What is the purpose of this? To go to work, to make food, to go shopping, to watch a movie...who cares? If there is no one around you, and no one cares?

So I want to find someone to love and someone who will love me back, and to build a family with him, and from what I understand American women, they don't want any of that...they just care about their looks, their achievements, that's what it seems to be...

And I mean, yes all of that is great, but after. After the most important thing. And here, I cannot find this thing. I can't compete with the young girls, who all want it too...

I mean I had some relationships. One was married, another was only available on weekends, totally in his career. I don't want that. I am not saying there are no good men here. There are wonderful men. Like my friend's husband, he is a fantastic human being. Kind, loyal,

smart. So, they exist. But they are so few.

What am I to do? Wait? I don't want to play victim here. I want to be doing something, to take action. So I did. I don't need anything really. I don't want some palace abroad. I don't want anything really-I live here in a two and half with my mom, and I am happy. I just want to have a family to take care of, to help my kids do homework. Otherwise what...is there? There are lots of teachers, I have friends...like my life, I like it, but it's useless...I need to feel indispensable, needed, useful to someone. All the rest of it, health, fun, friends, career they are supposed to help your family, your personal growth they are there to help you raise your kids and support your family. When there is no one, if you have no one to give to, to support...then your life is all about you, and that is not the purpose. All that matter that there's a kind, honest, dependable man with you. So, I will leave, I will learn English. I will do it all.

I know that there are women on these sites, on my agency site even, who are these young, half-naked girls...and they are there to...well the man who wants to contact me, who will want to learn about

me, he won't be interested in them. And I am all here, I am in this, as myself. Fully. Yes, I have good photographs on there, and they are cute, but they are still me. And I know that there are men out there, looking through these catalogues who really are looking for a wife. A friend, someone to build a life with. Because to wait, alone, and no one says anything, when you have given nothing, contributed nothing to anyone else's life...I can see that in some people...it is very sad. Work, Tv, food, friends...but all around themselves. I mean to find someone here, is unrealistic for me. Maybe it is my fault, but I know that for now, I can maybe find that one man out there...we will see what happens, who decides to write to me. So we will talk then...I will go now.

FADE TO BLACK

Vignette 6: "A Life Worth Leaving"

FADE IN

Interior. A Moscow apartment. Afternoon.

Aliona is sitting on a bed, packing.

ALIONA

So hello again, so next week I am going to Montreal, to Canada where I met this

man... So through my agency "Svetlana Love". I met Kris, and so I am going to fly to Canada...and it all is like a dream. I am packing and I don't even know what to bring... I am looking at it all as if it wasn't me...it's like a movie. I really never thought this really would happen...who would have thought?

I mean I hoped, but I never thought I could meet someone I could actually want to be with ...not like this. I can feel this is the right person...he brought us gifts...I mean he came here to meet me, and my mom, and he took me out to restaurants, walked around with me...and he was really committed to getting to know me. And he wants the same things as me...We had a translator...but we really did connect...even like that. And before he left he proposed to me...and now we are just finalizing the paperwork...I am moving there...and so I think...

Actually I don't need to think. I just need to do. So, I am doing...and I will see what needs to happen later...I can feel this is the right thing for me. I can sense that he wants the things...a family, a sense a purpose to his life, with a woman next to him. And I recognize that I do not know him very well...but I can learn, to love him. I can love him. And him too, he will respect me, as woman, like I want o be treated... I

don't need much, just a good, honest person to be next to me.

And I can feel that that is him. Maybe I am wrong...but I can feel that this is my path now. So I will go there, I am learning English will continue once I am there...do whatever needs to happen.

The rest is details. The only thing is that leaving my mom is very hard...but she understands, she will come visit us, she knows this is for us both. She wants me to follow my purpose.

So this sadness it is a happy sadness, an excited feeling really. I am walking around the house, gathering my things, thinking of gifts to bring. For him...I don't know. And so, I think, I hope, that next time I have anything to share, I will be in Canada, I hope...and I have nothing to lose. Everyone should just do what they need. And what I need is to have a good, kind, solid family and a kind, good man next to me. That is all I ever wanted. And where it happens, where I live, what language he speaks does not matter to me...at all.

FADE TO BLACK

Vignette 7: "I Can Learn to Love You"

FADE IN

Ext. Downtown Montreal. Afternoon.

Aliona is standing outside the Russian Embassy in Montreal.

ALIONA

Hello...I am so...I am in Montreal...I still can't believe it, it's surreal.

I came here a month ago and now I live in Laval with Kris in his...our house, he has wonderful house. So we have been going around and getting the things I need to make it a home for us. He gave me total freedom to get what I need for our kitchen, for the bedroom, cleaning supplies...to make the house as I need...as I want...it's been so busy. And now, what to say, we have just finished our meeting with the Russian consulate, and we signed all of our papers...I am his wife, officially...we got official permission to stay here, all we need tis to get our Canadian permit next week. I don't know how he did this so swiftly, no problems. With the lawyer...everything should be good.

And as far as our life here...he works a lot, and I am spending my time alone mostly...which is fine it's good, I knew that would happen, so I am using my time to get to know Laval, my new home, and I am starting English course again soon. It has been a bit hard of course...hard to communicate - we don't know each other very well, so understanding each other is

difficult, and I am a bit scared, and not having my mom here...All these new people around me, a new place. It's a shock, really...But everyone has been very nice and helpful, it's kind of strange for me, I am not used to this.

And as far as Kris, he is very kind. I can feel that he really does want what I need him to want...he wants me to be close to him.

And for me that is the most important thing, I have been looking for that, hoping to find that my whole life. I never thought I would. That it was possible. And now I see that it is. The language or the culture are not obstacles. The desire to create something together is the most important thing, and I know we both have it. So we can build a good family together, I know it. And apart from that, I am not thinking about anything...We are working on the house, I just hope to spend more time with him and his family now that it's Christmas... The only thing that's bothering me, is my mom, I am thinking a lot of how to bring her here, once I have full residency...I will really need her here, especially when ..we have kids. So I have to wait. But other than that I am not missing anything, I don't miss Moscow or my life there...it is very peaceful here. I am just

grateful. Grateful for this opportunity to find someone to meet him, to build a life with him, and to learn to love him, and I do not need anything other than that.

BLACKOUT

THE END

APPENDIX II

Field Notes

July 2017-January 2018

July 2nd

Introduction: Why?

http://canadacouncil.ca/about/careers/2481?utm_content=bufferca6c4&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

Why am I doing this?

I have been thinking more and more about my situation, as I take my place in Montreal for granted, often assuming that the life I never had in Russia has a romantic and “true” significance to me.

However, as soon as I started to conduct research into the RMOB, I found that there is a lot more to the subject. Everything that I thought I knew, was challenged. My opinion about “those” women, Russian politics, the way women’s empowerment may have been falsely represented in the communist era, and the way that traditional family values, I take for granted are misunderstood and perhaps misrepresented in the media both here and in Russia. I feel that this project stems from a long time of feeling categorized despite not fitting in. As well, I feel that the entertainment business I observed and finally rejected is very closely linked to the modern way of sharing one’s “brand” or “image” online, and that in turn is tied into the RMOB marketing and communication strategies with the men they target. This project is very close to my desire to study and connect the way the Soviet past created the “female” figure and the way she is treated now, among Russia’s entertainment and advertising culture, commercial overload, expansion and imperialism. The raging sexism and abuse of those weaker is prevalent in Russian culture. Children and the elderly are mistreated and human life in general is worth very little. Reading about the way women’s health care and social/political rights are shaped, I appalled and the normativity with which a woman’s body is abused and never protected by the state. How she is at the mercy of doctors, husbands and often relatives who may offer her shelter. Yet, how the Russian girl or woman appears in the mainstream Russian media, is very different. Sexualized,

glamorized, healthy, rich, fit, fragile, yet independent, family oriented and educated. She is like the supermodel academic, who is wants to be a doting mother wife. That is the stereotype I always felt compared to by my Canadian friends and colleagues. Maybe that's unfair. Regardless, I assumed that is what I needed to be, in order to be considered a Russian woman, and that was also why I never paid attention to the reality of Russian women, as I caught snippets of it in independent media and through friends. I am now into the academic analysis, and in reading "Toward an Understanding of Gendered Agency in Contemporary Russia", by Beth Holmgren I am being put back into the atmosphere of lies that permeates Soviet-Russian representation of the female experience. I can see how my opinion about the emancipation of Soviet women, their force, independence and access to rights that were not available to western women of the time, such as high-level education and jobs, access to abortions, etc. were actually a lot less empowering than I thought. They were actually a form of abuse. A woman had to use abortions as a method of birth-control! She also was expected to get a full degree, a good job, that still paid half of the amount of a man's wage AND have a family. She was to listen to the man, yet she was given all of the responsibilities of running a household, and was a target of most advertising. Yay, she could buy a washing machine with her own money. What a win. How could I miss this? If I missed this, I can only imagine the amount of confusion and misjudgment there exists in regards to the contemporary Russian female. Especially one that appears to want to leave her whole life behind and find a "rich" Western man to provide for her. She is either a bimbo or a gold digger...or... a woman that NO ONE wants? And why would that be? Because this seems to be the most truthful scenario. A woman that has no way to self-realize in Russia, according to what she believes she needs to do in order to be a real woman. To have a family. To take care of others, to contribute to society in a way that makes her feel valued and desired. So this project then is to give a new form to the this figure. A new shape and a new language with which to think of her.

July 4th

I have started doing my academic perspective analysis and there is quite a lot material that seems to help me understand how tied the RMOB business is to female migrants in general. The woman's role as housekeepers and mothers positions them vis-a-vis a potential "predator"...be it the commercial gain of an agency, a man's desire or political control.

I am wondering how to best analyze these articles, and how to spread out the research I am looking at, making it flow, and inform my creative writing... I think it would be best if I split them up into areas/themes of investigation:

- 1- The positioning of the women as the “outsider”, being analyzed as potential victims.*
- 2- The men, and their intent in finding a Russian wife.*
- 3- The socio-political situation in Russia*
- 4- MOB in the grand scale, the business on the global stage.*
- 5-Russian women’s values and desires.*
- 6- The RMOB internet agencies and their branding*
- 7 -Media representations.*

Meanwhile, I was happy to come across a reference to a film I had not seen yet- “In the Name of Love: Modern Day Mail Order Brides”. 2003. Directed by Shannon O’Rourke. Harriman, NY: New Day Films.

Although made in the early 2000s it has a 90s feel, also making the subject feel outdated, but standing out from the two other documentaries I saw, because it gives more screen time to some of the women, who also happen to be quite fluent in English. Again, here is a positioning that is problematic, the creators chose English-speaking women, while it seems that the majority of women in online catalogues aren’t...and that in itself is a huge topic. How much does language matter? I think, quite a bit, considering the fact that the first few points of contact with them men would be via some sort of verbal communication...Which feeds into an article on the way the online agencies are representing their clients...and how important their “translators” are.

“In helping her I became attracted to her”, says one man in the doc. This may make some people upset, but I feel sad for them both. And for the fact that his relationship with her will be misinterpreted, considering what he had said. Is it only in pity and sadness that a powerful man may want to “settle” down with one woman, when tens of them are as, he had put earlier, are at his disposal? I wonder if the woman would feel that. I want to find the voice of a proud, independent, sad, aware and very courageous woman, who is not sorry to say that she is ready to

“market” her body and her personality in a catalogue, and perhaps marry a man that wants to save her, that being his incentive for committing to her. So we are playing with the classic gender roles and replaying the idea that Russian women are miserable. Are they? Honestly, from what I am reading, seeing and the experiences that I have had shared with me by my friends, as well as my own observations in Moscow, yes they are. They are sad and lonely and scared to not fulfill their role, even without realizing this sadness, they have been conditioned to want a family, a healthy child, to “take care” to love a man, which this film reiterates.

There are clearly missing perspectives, one that analyze the actual, contemporary life of the women in Russia, as it is. The language barrier as well as a cultural and perhaps historical difference is the reason behind most western scholarship’s focus on the “newsworthy” or dramatic elements of the RMOB business? Not many, except for the Ericka Johnson’s book seem to actually speak to the women. How can you not? However, she too is limited, since her subjects are chosen based on their ability to speak to her in English.

July 10th, 2017

It is really helpful to think of the RMOB industry, as a multifaceted commercial best- that exposes transnational stereotypes, prejudice, fear and desire. I see that the original point of view, I had as a woman that constantly feels “viewed” as an object of curiosity by men, my assumptions often prevent me from having empathy and the space to listen to the reasons behind the men’s “aggressive” or “controlling” behaviors, especially when it comes to the online marriage sites. I can appreciate that these men are often also taken advantage by the brokers that promise them a “product. Considering our consumer-oriented environment, and the fact that western men seem to feel entitled to being the “savior” and the “owner”, can we trace this back to a history of colonialism, domination, abuse and “consumption” of female bodies within the framework of western “development”? Holway’s analysis is very helpful and offers a way to see that these men are in fact attracted by a certain marketing technique that places them firmly in the “consumer is always right” frame. In “In the Name of Love” film, around the 37 minute a scholar speaks of the fact that Russian women are “unwanted” by Russian men, once they have a child. That the child will never be considered the man’s, the way an American man would adopt and behave like a father to his wife’s child...Is this true? I have experienced this. “If he could give me everything else I wanted, I would become physically attracted”- Elena (31 min). “Warren helps me around

the house and t=with the children, and he cooks very well...and it's easy to get along with Warren"- this I feel is key: he is easy to get along with, easygoing, relaxed...supportive and helpful. Elena is not alone in the marriage, and she does not need to aby him, as she would with a Russian man, or else, she does not need to feel alone and abandoned as she did in her first marriage...Is this universal? Yes people cheat and lie and let others down, but the level of disrespect toward women and children- as it is in Russia- as it is an ACCEPTED norm there, that is pretty different from the west, despite all of its patriarchal and male-oriented structures of being and living in a "civilized", "advanced and developed society...so...Is this just Russia? "I am happy already if nobody hurts me"(30 min) "When everyday you have fear of another collapse...this fear is in you, in your genes, in the genes of Russian people" -Ina (about John)

"This is the morning after we first made love.." he holds up a photograph of Ina, sexily dressed and posing on a sofa. There is something so wrong, so innately dark about his comment an the way it's made in front of other affluent Americans...But yet he sounds very transparent in his feeling towards her and intentions to support her and her children. He seems to care, and yet is oblivious (or is he?) to the way his comments make him and his union appear...

July 15th

Writing the vignettes is so much fun, and it flows really well with my reading, and the films I am discovering as they fuel and inform my decisions, and inspire me.

I have started to sketch out the characters, based on my pilot project, where i performed uniquely as a RMOB. Here, I will introduce other characters, all female, obviously, as I am the one playing them. I also want to the scenes to be simple, with the "less is more" structure, so I can easily improvise should I feel the need to during filming.

July 19th

So in reading about the marketing strategies of these websites and understanding the impact the HUMAN beings behind them have in shaping and supporting this industry. Heyse does a fantastic job in analyzing and displaying The curation of the content- the pictures, the blurbs or letters "from" the women to the prospective customers. I am feeling quite torn about these customers. I can see the desire for a woman that will take care of, love - perform a mythological female role

for a woman that is surrounded by women that are experiencing freedom, liberation, empowerment. From Buffy to Wonder woman, to Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama, to the supermodels that become goodwill ambassadors, athletes that become the first female champions in the cross-fit games. Western women are finally able to truly grasp the reality of the work pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir and Gloria Steinem, the work so deeply connected to by Virginia Wolf and Georges Sand before her. These western men are losing their grasp on masculinity as it depended on a specific definition of femininity, woman-ness, the “real female”. It is fascinating to see the importance of “authenticity” and “self-representation” that is strategically targeted to satisfy the man’s dream vision of his best “other half” prospect. I do not realize how big of a role these “translators” that are matched to each woman play in adapting the women’s already guided letters describing themselves. This is so much like show business. In a big - unregulated pool of online communication, marketing and “hunting” for connection. I think I may use the figure of the interpreter and one of my characters- a girl that is matched to a prospective RMOB, has to coach, guide and arrange the RMOB’s profile to match what the western male gaze desire...or appears to desire, and that in itself is based on ethnic biases, patriarchal values, fear, exotisation, commodification of female bodies in the general media... Are these men also victims ...of the marketing schemes? Looking for someone to reassure them that THEY are not the problem? That they too can have what they have been taught a man “deserves” or must achieve in order to feel like has had a fulfilled life...a woman, kids, a “home”...And this woman must be full of desire and eagerness to give him what he wants...that is key. In a way these men want a woman that truly WANTS what they think a woman SHOULD want. And The agencies must play into that, making it more and more ingrained in the psyche of western consumers and the media that the Russian women IS THAT innately and is fully authentic in her desire to comfort, take care of and fulfill the fantasy...the fantasy is in fact “normal” - a reality for her. Except it isn’t always. (Which is where the ABUSE and disillusionment, and abandonment of these women by their “saviors” may come in.... These women actually have lot of agency. Which is what Heyse also importantly points out: the sheer act of applying to be a RMOB takes courage and self- determination, agency...

However...there are those Russian women that DO truly want to be the female the men say they cannot find in the west. And these women are also victims of the fantasy man, delivered to the

east through Hollywood film, TV shows adverts and general media- the Faithful, respectful strong, loving and RESPECTFUL American Man.

July 23rd

Yulia Zabyelina's work along with the repeated watching of the Documentary: DOCS: Diary of the Mail Order Bride, have left me with a more clear understanding of the actual operational procedures of the MOB websites, and I can draw more of a clear line from the marketing, the selling, the contact between parties and the "desired result"- marriage, which is the hot commodity being sold as rare, sexy and NEEDED by both the lonely men and the "lost" women.

Reading about women's situation in contemporary Russia in a paper about gender equality: Gender Equality and Culture (Russian Federation) in Informkultura, I found this quote: In contemporary Russia, multiple cultural patterns including traditional (pre-modern), modern and post-modern ones coexist and determine its sociocultural specificity. They also manifest themselves in co-existence of many types of gender behavior, patriarchal domination of male stereotypes that are widely treated as a norm, gender based labor division and segregation in the workplace. On the other hand, perceptions of culture are also very traditionalist or age old. Expanding general awareness of the issues concerned with gender and culture and their interrelation seems to be the key approach to related problems solving. (page 15)

I am finding that there is real mystery surrounding the fact that women in Russia may prioritize Family building- and this is being ratified by the films I found: Love Me and My Online Bride. Both made in 2014, they represent a more recent look at the RMOB, although they follow Ukrainian women. In the interest of my research I will use them, as the women speak Russian, and the Ukraine is very close to Russia as far as its culture and gender roles.

It is interesting to see the deceit that may take place, while at the same time to notice the sincerity of some subjects' testimonials. Are They Acting? Maybe. But having spent time in the company of Russian women, young and old, I am aware of the truth behind some of their reasons for posting themselves online. The reasons are quite prosaic, but very, very real: lack of men. And lack of Eligible Men. Ones that can provide a family. Russian life is hard, but that is not the reason for the majority of these women's desire to connect to a foreigner. The media representations of women to the men and vice versa play a CRITICAL role. Just as confused as they men are, when

the reality of the Russian woman may differ from the mainstream picture, of a sex kitten that is obsessed with being a homemaker and will take any kind of man- the women in Russia set their sights on American men specifically, because America represents FREEDOM, POWER, MONEY, SEX and American men in the shape of Kevin Costner, Tom Cruise, Tom Brady, Bradley Cooper (who is dating and having a child with the Russian supermodel, Irina Shayk) etc- these are the only real images of American men. Quite the contrast to Russian men. The latter are definitely not glorified in the media either. Russian media tends to portray Russian men as drunks and flakes. Always has. Which is really interesting. And so Russian women may assume that just as that is the truth- so is the American Dream. I guess, to an extent....American men are definitely more respectful and aware of the Woman as someone to care for....this is my experience too.

July 31st

And so I am done with my lit analysis and onto the media. I am focusing on the news stories and documentaries, some of which I have already mentioned. My script so far is as a series of monologues that will represent the research I have done- touching upon The woman's experience bookmarking these points of view:

1-the news,

2-the academia,

3- the man's perspective,

4-the woman's best friend

5- The RMOB agency

And throughout there is a lingering presence I shall investigate the RMOB herself- a vivid figure of a woman before and after her journey...

She will find a husband. Is it a happy ending....I will let the audience decide that.

I do want this to have an open ended "happy ending". Only because I do see and believe that with the admittance of the enormous compromises that these women undertake, some form of a "happy ever-after" can be achieved.

I reference sad stories. I reference stories of deceit.

But my point here is to humanize an object- a subject as it is the “Other” exotic, dangerous and isolated, desired and feared- as per Hall’s description of the “exotic other”.

It is interesting to note that I have come across reading the above text in Informkultura that investigates the importance of the Internet as being a way for Russian Women to explore their possibilities- researching new opportunities online and connecting to others, - using Social Media, networking sites and learning about subjects that were for decades forbidden in Russia/Soviet Union.

Gender mainstreaming is more successful within the new formats of cultural production and consumption based on information and communicative technologies. New opportunities for Russian women were offered by dissemination of new technologies, especially by development of the Runet (the Russian part of the Internet) which provides for new opportunities for educational and professional upgrading and encourages achieving higher social and cultural status by women. It also serves as the efficient means to eliminate gender asymmetry in getting access to information and jobs, social support and cultural goods. (Gender Equality and Culture (Russian Federation) Informkultura (P. 13))

And with that they encounter the possibility of merging dating and marriage and connecting to a foreign - strong and empathetic man- and American prince.

So maybe my subject will be that she will stumble across this opening through the new found freedom of Surfing the Net.

She begins her journey by putting the two together- seeing the American media as the truth- and saying yes to the agencies’ ads, when she searches for “dating online”. She also knows someone who has found a man online. She also is conscious of the trafficking link, and the slavery network that is connected to this. She is educated, and she is wholesome, but she is ready to “play” the part of the Russian damsel. She has been through Tinder, and she has experienced abuse. How much more dangerous is this? How much does she have to lose?

What are the stakes?

Not having children. Being physically hurt- and not being able to file a complaint. Having an elderly mother to take care of and not being able to help her financially- knowing that her health is always at risk.

August 6th

I am finding inspiration to revisit one of characters and flesh her out as based on the figures of the agency owners I have been encountering in the two docs: “Love Me”, “My Online Fiancee” and in Ericka Johnson’s book, which is has been the foundation for my work- “Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband”. The latter text is very good at introducing different characters, all female as part of the story of the RMOB avatar. In a way I appreciate the short stories that all interweave to create a portrait of the Russian woman beyond this figure.

In my performance piece, I am interested in exploring how the blatant inherent racism, which Ericka Johnson addresses in her chapter “Anya: From Feminism to Femininity” goes both ways in the MOB industry, when investigating preference of some western men that specifically want a Russian MOB as opposed to the Asian MOBs on the market. Russian women have the same exotic commodity label, but they are white. They are marketed as foreign, domestic, exotic and available, however they are Caucasian, which makes them attractive to the mainstream western society, and similar to the western idea of the perfect woman.

The dichotomy between Feminism and Femininity is something I want to constantly brush upon, and question. I, as a feminist student and researcher, a female, often sexualized performer and a female that is considered “Other” and “exotic” and often considers herself quite feminine- but feminist distinguishes between the two terms. This has been my experience as a Russian immigrant as well- feminism was not a term I grew up hearing or hearing in way that would make me want to learn more about it or to become associated with it? I understand why now. In working on this specific project, I find a lot of similarities with the way my fellow Russian women, family members, friends see and discuss the term. I also understand my own shock at uncovering it’s true value and the importance of it to anything I consider my privileges and the freedoms I enjoy as a Canadian woman- this year has been highly enlightening, and it is in reading the likes of Foucault, Haraway and, feminist media scholars (Butler, hooks...). that I

finally understand that I, along with my mother and grandmother (despite their complete disassociation from the term) have been acting out a feminist manifesto of our own.

July 30th

Developing these characters in my CELTX document, and improvising with some lines, while I feel out how much improvisation I should leave room for. I am crafting stories to address the most pressing issues around the RMOB, and making them speak through female voices, as I will be taking on these masks, although I dislike the word “masks”. These imaginary Bodies. Through these Bodies, I will be speaking with the language of the media, academia, human rights organizations, family/friends, the men, western women and of course, THE RMOB herself, as she will be the first and last vignette in this project. Finding a way to speak for the men, was interesting as I have been working on the character of a male RMOB client’s sister. I feel a little confused as to how to integrate my fictional writing into and with my thesis- as far as the literature I am looking at. But the more I write the more ideas emerge, and the more simple they are, there are really only a few elements that need to be touched upon in this work. Important ones being the media fantasy, an academic “tunnel vision” and the website marketing. Then there is the men’s ideal, one they pursue and expect.

All with the backdrop on the WOMAN’s journey. I want the audience to be on her side, but to be awarded the respect to draw their own conclusions.

Thus far, here are my seven scenes, and I will from now on, and in the thesis refer to them as “vignettes”, as they comprise a collage of a Russian Mail Order Bride as seen by many female eyes, always with the backdrop of the main issues brought up in the literature and films I am looking at.

Vignette 1. “A Life Worth Leaving”

*Interior. a bedroom in Moscow. daytime
A young woman is sitting o a bed, packing.
Aliona*

Vignette 2. "Let Me Save You"

Int. Newsroom in Montreal

A female newscaster is sitting in front of a green screen.

Megan

Vignette 3. "What You Want"

int. RMOB MOSCOW office

A made-up, young woman is standing by the office table.

Svetlana

Vignette 4. "There is Nothing Here"

Exterior. A park bench in Moscow

A young woman is sitting on a bench.

Tanya/Aliona

Vignette 5. "They Know Nothing"

Int. University Library

A woman is standing by a bookcase.

Jennifer

Vignette 6. "I Feel Sorry for Her"

Int. Kitchen Table in a Montreal apartment

Megan is sitting and drinking coffee, facing the camera.

Jessica

*Hello, my name Jessica, my brother Kris has recently decided to order a Russian Mail Order
Bride, and she is arriving on Tuesday...*

Vignette 7. I Can Learn to Love You

Interior.

Aliona is standing at by the window of a Montreal Apartment, by a Christmas Tree.

Diana Taylor's book should be helpful for me, as I justify and understand my intentions with PERFORMING these scenes. Why are they not just stories? Why do I need to physically play these characters? And why do they need to be made immortal on video? I.e. virtually immortal!

August 14th

In analyzing the websites I am confronted with the variety and overwhelming amount of these businesses, some of which masquerade as dating sites, and some blatantly displaying women as objects to be purchased. Looking at "A Volga Girl", I am unsettled by the racist desires of the women, as they describe their ideal mate. This brings me back to Johnson's example of the expressed racism in her conversations with Olga, in "Feminism or Femininity".

The experience of looking at all of the various profiles, as a Russian female immigrant, as a student whose focus has been discourse analysis, and as a former actress, it really upsets me, seeing the blatantly sexist and degrading slogans, as well as the self-description maneuvers that are focused on answering to very specific desires, that have been advertised to the women putting themselves up for "sale". However, their open calls to a "real man", sharing their feminine traits, desires for a family, dreams of a traditional household and in some cases measurements, reiterate what I have been reading in the literature. However, having investigated the different sides of the coin, I want to negotiate the dominating discourse of the fragile, anti-feminist, accepting, warm and educated woman, that may in fact believe that her real value lies solely in her ability to interest and keep a man who will be the anchor of the family she will create and maintain around his figure. Many conversations have been had with my colleagues and acquaintances on the subject, and it is sad how most well-meaning, well-read and kind people immediately share their firm belief that the only thing to know about RMOB is that these are women that want either a rich husband or a green card. The films, of course offer more depth, while still telling the same story. My intention is more focused now, I really do not want to break the stereotype or fight the dominating discourse. I want to offer a more varied, more human reflection on the subject, negotiating the many reasons behind the women's decisions to pose as RMOBs, while speaking through different personas, all of which require our attention, if we are to truly question the legitimacy of the industry and its effects on the people that become a part of it. What false stories bedevil us in different shapes? I may be looking at the RMOB, however I am

looking at the way the global media business handles women, exoticism, gender roles and family, with the internet providing a non-regulated and never-stopping flow of information, images and words that inconspicuously come together in orchestrated ways, producing discourses of control, domination, power and desires, as well purpose, love and connection.

August 20th

I have been reviewing some of the news/entertainment press coverage I have uncovered in the early stages of my research and more recently. As I construct the figure of the “bride” that has successfully married and is sharing her story for one of my vignettes, as well as the one of a newscaster delivering a story aimed to “shock” or entice a mainstream Western audience, these are helpful, as I find a way to adopt a different language and vocabulary for each character. I find that including an analysis of these news stories in my thesis would be too much, and is unnecessary, as most of the subjects that emerge around the RMOB are dealt with in the literature and the films, and are showcased in the websites themselves.

The "Man Who Killed His Mail-Order Bride May Have 'Gotten Away With Murder Of Girlfriend A Decade Earlier' " by Meghan Keneally and Snejana Farberov in the Daily Mail, attempt to bring attention to the question of murder, as a dark effect of the abuse that can stay hidden in international unions. The fact that Russian women are often afraid to seek help and are unaware of their rights, as explored by both Chun and Holway are important to consider, as well as Russian women's acceptance of physical abuse...which is also retaliated in Johnson's book, as she quotes a phrase/saying I have heard many times: “he beats me, so he loves me”. As ridiculous and as sad as that sounds, this is prevalent in Russian history and ingrained in the male psyche- where machismo is tied to male self-worth, since the latter is in dispute considering the economic crisis, which left a lot of men out of a job, and also a nation where masculinity means control and domination of those weaker than them, a.k.a the women, the children....the foreigners.

August 24th

Watching Two Brothers and a Bride has been upsetting, more so than I thought. This film is by far the most detrimental to the way the industry may be seen by a fiction film's audience.

There is definitely a need for a different RMOB character on screen. Tis confirms my script, and the vignettes, although I only have two scenes with Aliona, she is the character that

need the audience's attention throughout, her presence must be felt when she is not in the scenes.

In Two Brother and a Bride, having assumed that the main female character would be a RMOB played by Emily Mortimer, I was expecting a similar viewing experience to Birthday Girl, with the Western superstar actress trying to show a RMOB's experience. Not so. Mortimer actually plays an undercover British journalist, and there are NO RMOB characters that have an actual presence in the film as legitimate drivers of the story. Basically, what we have is a film about American masculinity, discovering the "fun" of trying on Russian brides, and sightseeing in St-Petersburg. No Russian female's point of view is given any space, however, we see a lot of the agency's president, "mock" interviews with American men and of course, the comic relief of the two men in a strange country, and on an even stranger "Romance Tour". At least Birthday Girl brushed up against abuse, slavery and the control RMOB's attribute to men in general. Considering these two films are the only major motion pictures on the subject, I am actually happy to make my vignettes into a more "entertaining" video, as I want to tap into the fiction film structure, while maintaining a critical approach to the industry, and using myself as an artist/activist, as Diana Taylor's Performance explores in depth. This book has been very interesting to me as an actor and a writer, considering this is the first time I am creating something aimed at negotiating a contested subject. My performance of both the bride figure and those that discuss her existence is aimed at humanizing all parties, but mainly that of the woman behind the avatar.

September 1st

I have been re-reading Owen Chapman's and Kim Sawchuk's work on research-creation, as I am happily embarking on what I identify as the "creation" part of my project. However, did the writing of my first draft of the thesis not a creative project? It took a lot out of me, in both discipline and understanding how to conduct an analysis that is based in the tools I acquired this year, insofar as my ability to analyze visual and textual content and criticize it, raise questions, draw some conclusions, but to also remain aware of my own positioning as very specific- as my "situated knowledge" is a strength and a limitation.

As Barrett states, "the writing of qualitative research, as with the work of artists, is ultimately about (re) presenting a set of meanings to an audience" (2010, p.11). Arts based methods can be employed as a means to create "critical awareness to raise

consciousness”; they are useful for “identity work,” they can help “give voice to subjugated perspectives,” “promote dialogue,” (Barrett, 2010, p. 13-15) (including extending academic work to wider audiences), and evoke (often multiple) meanings through inductive means. Again, such possibilities reinforce our claim that research-creation projects can provide powerful forms of introspection and intervention” (Chapman and Sawchuk, 12)

September 12th

I see my work here as an imaginary ethnography- and they approach the subject, by bringing attention to the fact that a creative project is not inferior to academic research as we know it, and is not another kind of ethnography (13).

My ethnography here is definitely imaginary, as I practice my characters, using my body and voice, creating scenarios, utilizing my temperament - as I was taught in school and in my experience as a stage and film actor.

I have been playing with vocal qualities of each language, as I practice my speech, before I even learn any lines. The actual text is almost ready in my mind- I have been creating these monologues for the past 7 months, since February, when I first decided upon this subject, and made a plan to create a video performance.

One exercise is to be given “the given circumstances” (Meisner). I have started with the persona I want to explore the most, evidently the “RMOB”.

September 15th

I am looking at integrating my stories into the literature analysis, however I am having a very hard time understanding how to do it effectively, making the academic arguments flow along with examples from documentary films. How can I make them cluster under the 7 scenes I wrote? And I am thinking of already expanding and adding more...I want the vignettes to be in dialogue with one another.

September 21st

I am experimenting with moving my media review around, as I understand that the documentaries are very helpful in exemplifying the academic literature, as the themes are the same. The Fiction films, however focus more on stories that I can explore separately.

As I have been working on this, I find that I need to go back to the vignettes and tweak the words a little, as to connect the characters to what is MISSING in the fictional and documentary representations of RMOBs, while always coming FROM those characters, as they are really my only point of reference, visually. Insofar as my familiarity with actual RMOBs, I am coming from the same place that my audience will.

I find this refreshing, as I understand what is MISSING.

How can we view this and really let the information speak as truthful, to that Particular character. Could it help...well I hope it will help us see that we CAN be all of those points of view. It depends on where you are, what you see, what you choose to see. What do we choose to see and why?

September 28th

Why are there so few men? This question has been taking me inwards. In the sense that I can really see the frustration and the exhaustion Russian women experience, without ever thinking that that is not normal...the amount of women I know in Russia that are single and unable to find a man to treat them well, or even well enough...The research I have done shows that this is definitely a huge reason for the business to flourish. Educated and beautiful women just cannot find themselves a partner. Period. They have a career, they have financial security, often they have a great life, but the men just want a younger, prettier or more innocent woman...I don't know that is whole research subject in itself. I do not want to emphasize the drinking and the general disrespect the men exercise towards Russian women, as the women are often very proud and patient, carrying their "cross" as they say. They seldom will share their anger. But they will convey disappointment, and their pride to be female. Aliona is string, she is open about her loneliness and the fact that there are no eligible male partners, but as most Russian women she will not try to go into too much detail as to why, since for her that is the norm. They are absent, they are cheating, they often drink more than desired...but she knows no other reality.

Meanwhile in my text is where I will touch upon these factors more. However, they are not the REASON for Aliona's becoming a RMOB, they are just adding to the general feeling of being useless, and not feeling like she is living her feminine essence her purpose. For her that is an indisputable truth. As it is for many Russian women, and I have to say I am starting to see it as a strength. Even though, it appears to go against modern feminist ideals...There is more there.

October 4th

I have started rehearsing, and I love the flow of words. I am also connecting the visual imaginary shots to what I am reading in my script- it needs to be simple. Not elaborate. My distinct. It is very interesting to admit that I am still not sure about the final story, and I know once I start taping it will start coming through. At this point I am looking for a way to tie the stories together...not sure how yet. My written research thesis is all over the place it seems. I can see the chapters and dominant ideas, but again, I know they will become clear only once I have the shots down.

October 14th

As per Yasmin's instruction and encouragement I have started filming. First, the scenes are longer, they are more like pieces onto themselves, and I would rather not cut anything out. Let them be longer. I started recording with the Academic. Here I have a prototype of someone who means well and is backed up by research, but is conflicted and removed, and still has no real connection to the women she is investigating through the RMOB. Oh my gosh, I have forgotten how much work acting and self-tapes are!!!! One take after another, it is either the staging/lighting/angle that does not work, or the physicality and language that needs adjusting. Then there is the rush of being in character and improvising...and getting carried away. So much to say!! I almost wish I had done a live performance and a play...where I would have more room in real time and more TIME. But then again, I can have more time, I just need to make sure it is well allocated and the main ideas come through and tie together.

Once done, the scene was around 5 minutes!!!! However I am okay with that. Maybe I will have 5-6 vignettes and also will have 4 chapters? Then I taped the "sister" vignette, again I played with the staging, costume etc...and this character, Jessica, she is closer to me, and she

will give us the man's POV but always through her female, western perspective. I want to have as little MALE vice as possible, and for it to be "normal". This is a piece about women. And a woman must be speaking from her "situated knowledge" at all times. Reversing the perspective, as the media is almost always stirred by a man. Even when he is not seen.

Then, I decided to nix the "best friend" and instead to turn that monologue into one more of Aliona- the RMOB herself's vignettes. It could be the intro one to her story. I want to keep it to as few voices as possible to give myself structure for the chapters. So I re-wrote the scene, and performed it as Aliona. So frustrating, so weird, this one feels more like ME, the me that would have been. I so understand her anger, her desire to be independent and to prove that she is really not a silly girl trying to run away. And then...

I had this great take...and it was OUT OF FOCUS!!! Oh the joys of filmmaking.

So finally I recorded those three. I will record the newscaster, Megan Markell (yes since there is media frenzy around an actress with an allophone name, I want to play with that. in the Green screen studio tomorrow, as she will introduce the vignettes that do not feature Aliona. This newscaster will have the whole weight of "reporting the facts" and investigating/entertaining and influencing the masses without actually going deep into the subject.

Recording the first of Aliona's first scenes has been quite interesting. Less strategy and more intuition and spontaneity, that's when the creation takes its place firmly in my practice.

The work has been done and with Aliona I am really stepping into the shoes of this woman, who feels so far away, but so close. In a way she is truly removed from us, geographically and culturally. Jessica and Jennifer are closer. As for Meghan, she is a "persona" I hoped to embody and a "role" I pursued, as do most in the communication sphere.

October 16th

I recorded Meghan, the newscaster today, and it was fun, but this was almost the hardest one. The green screen will allow for inserts etc., which is very helpful. Trying to tie everything together, and making decisions on the fly to not introduce Aliona's vignettes as one part of my other characters' perspective. I decided tonight that I will have myself, Sasha interrupt the

narrative and segue into Aliona's story. As a the creator, I want to bring an audience towards meeting Aliona AFTER they see the dominant perspectives and hear from everyone BUT the RMOB.

Meghan is everything a media star could be, embodying the popular way of doing research. She is affluent, polished and ultimately has the golden ticket, she can judge and ask questions, and influence her audience through the power of the tv/YouTube screen, as she comes into your living room.

The vignettes thus become more of a story in two parts, more of a film. Which I am very happy about.

Tomorrow I will tape the "RMOB" agency manager's vignette. Svetlana will tie it all in, bringing it back to the BUSINESS it is. I am deviating from the scripts I wrote as a lot of the words and even ideas feel unnatural, and not clear enough for visual communication.

Finally this weekend I will tape two more scenes with Aliona, allowing for her story to develop as she meets a man online, and finally after her move to Montreal. My own introduction will come right before, as a frustrated media consumer, and student who happens to be Russian and have access to a space where I could let Aliona tell her story in "response" to the Media narrative of the academic, the business owner and the "consumer's family member insight into the issues of a woman that decides to build a whole new life with a man who wants to "buy" her companionship through an online agency's catalogue of bodies.

This process of taping is a lot more work than I anticipated actually, which is so funny, as I used to do so much of this. Thank Yasmin! I am so happy to be doing it now, as I can return to creating more cohesive chapters after shooting the five characters- and myself as a sixth one- and as a narrator...so I, in a way am the intro and conclusion all at once, as it is there that my voice will come through the most, apart from the process chapter.

So maybe...

Chapter one:

Academic perspective:

The female VICTIMS: Jennifer

The Man's Desire glimpsed through his sister: Jessica

Chapter three:

The women's positioning: Aliona

Chapter four:

The Marketing perspective and the "justification" of the websites: Svetlana Love

Chapter five:

The Mass Media's voice through the "news host" and feature films: Meghan

- *I might ..well I WILL HAVE TO cut down my film review, and possibly add some mass media coverage as well, as this will flow nicely with the newscaster omnipotent command of pop media in general. This chapter is LAST before the Woman's perspective in MY Written THESIS. But in the Creation part it will be FIRST, as it all BEGINS with the Media.*

Chapter Five:

The WOMAN: Aliona

My Own Voice: Process Chapter

Holy moly, this is making more sense...now only if I could arrange my chaptersI need to cut so much text!!!!

SHOULD I maybe have the media review - the films and news-stories FIRST in my thesis, to MATCH the vignettes' flow of scenes?

This feels so good. It is so good to realize that the creative part is as important and IMPERATIVE, an integral part of the process.

Filming has given me a way out into the embodied experience of this work I have been doing for months. I am allowed to experiment and be spontaneous.

I am discovering that I am inviting an open mind when it comes to looking at the men's perspective. Truth be told, I feel that they too, are often looking for a way to be accepted and loved. This raises questions about our society's values these days. Do we value old-fashioned masculinity? Do I? How would I see it from abroad, if I were to be in Russia?

October 18th

I re-recorded Jessica and Aliona's second scene. This time I worked more on the storytelling aspect and invited a friend to come and watch me, while helping me focus. The self-taping is very precarious, and I am worried about missing a good take due to poor focus, as it already happened. We taped Jessica, and she spoke more to the tragi-comic reality of her brother's pending marriage.

It is interesting how she is both speaking as an independent woman, an antithesis to Aliona's traditional, innocent and sad energy. Jessica is a real Canadian girl. But she is also on her brother's side. She is there to state that he is a good guy, and she is voicing doubts and worries that she feels would protect him. But the fact that he is a recluse and is convinced that an old-fashioned woman is his only way to happiness, is troubling. How will he react if Aliona changes or behaves differently? Another story, but something to be aware of- more questions to ask for the audience.

October 21st

This has been a very interesting process of letting myself film the scenes, and accepting that they do not often look like what I had planned, but in a wonderful way- as my rehearsal and previous research clearly influence my work more than I anticipated!

Especially when it comes to the Aliona narrative I feel very vulnerable and connected to her experience, exploring parts of myself as a woman that is single, self-sufficient but often lonely and feeling the urge for a family.

Looking at my thesis, I know that there is a lot I need to cut. I am looking for a fluidity to tell the story in a way that complements my narrative, using the vignettes as sub-chapters, and main chapters. I will be discussing how to use the fictional voices to guide the text, while adding snapshots/screenshots of the women that embody given narratives.

Aliona's final scene is the most interesting and has been the hardest to film. She is happy, but she is equally overwhelmed and on the spot...talking about someone she barely knows. But she is determined to make it work that is what I want to bring across. Her determination and optimism that she can learn to love Kris, and that them wanting the same thing- family, kids is the force that will make them overcome any cultural or emotional barrier. I do believe conviction does make things easier for some. The certainty that you have nothing to lose makes one accept and welcome events that may seem scary and even ridiculous. Aliona is focused on her present and is not going to let any doubts enter her mind.

October 30th

The vignettes have been filmed....I am discovering how much work I have put into the research as it feels very fluid- despite the fact that I find I need to redo them, and come with a fresh perspective- i.e. take a couple of days and ruminate on some, and shoot them it again. At this point all but one are filmed. The one I have left is difficult as it is the last one with Aliona, after she has been in Quebec for a month and has received her papers.

Rehearsing these over and over, I feel like I could easily be one of the RMOBs. They are no longer "THEY". I realize how fake and ridiculous the agencies sites are. My own inability to go beyond judgement and assumptions show just how much the mediation of this industry contributes to ALL public opinion on the subject. The literature is hard to come across- nor is the regular consumer going to search for it, really.

Which is why I feel that there is a space for my project. I feel I could be Aliona, or I would be Aliona, if I had stayed in Russia. And then to fight for my image to be truthful among the sea of "bimbos" and "gold-diggers" or "models"...

November 9th

Yasmin has given me the golden ticket! I need to reshape my thesis in a way that speaks along with the vignettes.

So I will shoot the last one and then begin restructuring my writing to come from the point of view of my heroines.

Performing is a way for me to create an Experience for the audience, to engage with and be affected by the story, the face, the voice, the body and the energy being projected. How do I create an experiential research project. And so I will have my characters present and introduce the salient points raised by my research into the literature, the films and the websites.

This is my way of making something that can stand on its own, and happens to employ the same technique that may cause damaging and superficial beliefs to be formed in the minds of video consumers. I am thus turning the medium into a positive vehicle, allowing for ambiguity, a personal engagement from your truly and empathy, first and foremost.

November 16th

The work is flowing so much better now that I know the structure! I am cutting sections easily and now reshaping and rephrasing my writing to really be CREATIVE Non-Fiction...Fiction!

What is really interesting is that my shortest section is the one from Aliona's perspective, i.e. the one on the reasons behind the Russian Women's decisions to enter the RMOB avatar!

I am reworking the idea of these women as separate from me. They are all parts of me. I could be any one of them and fully express their point of view. In doing this work, and performing these monologues in a way that felt spontaneous has now led me to see this project as a conversation with different realities. I can see the superficial and deep pain that Svetlana harbors, without realizing it perhaps, as a woman who feels that she must maintain this picture perfect Russian Bride performance, in order to earn her living in the West, and maintain her relationship, with her husband, Mr. Campbell.... I specifically chose a classic Anglo-Saxon name for her, and she is the only one! The rest all sport some derivatives of French, German, Polish....as Canada is a melting pot...But Svetlana has firmly placed her "assimilation mask on", all the while

maintaining her exoticism in order to bank on it, possibly with a push from her businessman husband. Another story to be told there.

November 26th

I was able to make my text flow through the chapters now, and have cut a lot out, half of it. So much is more evident now that I have filmed my vignettes. It is really interesting how the sister, Jessica is really careful to mention her brother's shortcomings, but they do come through. I wonder what Kris is like- is he a "loser" as per the literature's suggestion? Why would Aliona choose him? She is an intelligent woman, he cannot be empty. And he is quite decisive and determined. His choosing Aliona also answers to her certainty that despite so many women on the RMOB platform who may be there for superficial or indecent reason, the man that speaks to Aliona, will want her, and all that she represents. Although her pictures may be sexy, which we won't see, once the man actually meets her he will see her sincerity. Also she is not a bimbo. That is clear. She is also older. Kris is paying for her to learn English, He came to see her, and spoiled her...what does it say about her? How does she feel about him in way, spending all of this money on her? How does she feel about the idea of Laval? All this must be there, under the surface and she will have to deal with these feelings after the infatuation is over. However her focus is on the big picture. And the big picture is that HE has made it official- he proposed to her before leaving Moscow, and is following through. And her mother liked him. That means a lot to her.

December 1st

Working on the editing now and in tandem restructuring the intro and the chapters. This is quite fun actually. I feel like I have done the work and it just needs to be moved around and I am working on the conceptual side now, figuring out effects to add to the intro- i.e. Maighan Markelle's newsagent, and collecting screenshots to put into the video as well as into the paper, again as per Yasmin's suggestion, which is working very well. Thinking a lot about who this is intended for, and how to make it fun to watch. The video is 30 minutes long!!!

Having completed my research, written the screenplay and finally having recorded and edited the final video projects aimed to start a new conversation among scholars and the general public regarding the phenomenon of the Russian Mail Order Bride, I am now happy to say the

questions I had formulated as inspiration and a guidelines for my work on this project have been negotiated through it.

December 5th

Looking at the scenes in sequence is really awesome. It is also making me realize how amazing video is. It all just looks so easy and effortless, it is so hard to imagine the process behind scene work. My aim here was to keep them very intuitive, fresh and vulnerable. Natural. I had my script, but from all of them I took the story wherever it felt needed in the moment of filming.

Speaking of my vignettes with others, especially the times when I had asked people to help with the camera operating, was really helpful, as I was able to explain the why of every character. I had to reshoot three scenes entirely, because I felt that the material needed to be expanded upon, as well as the aesthetics of the shot needed to be re-evaluated. Each setting was chosen carefully, and meant to really speak for the character.

Considering they are all pieces of me.

December 13th

After seeing Yasmin and showing her the rough scenes without the draft, I have more ideas to implement! The thesis will flow as the film does, through the characters, each bringing forth her argument, and each being embodied by the researcher, Sasha.

I re-filmed Jennifer, the academic today. It felt very good, as I realize that in continuing to steep in my work, and by editing the thesis into the draft that it is, through these voices, has greatly benefitted my idea of the Academic voice, and Yasmin picked up on the fact that it could need some more serious emphasis on the victimization”, which stems from the fact that the industry is still very much connected to violence and abuse, which is crucial to Voice here.

December 20th

I showed Yasmin and a group of her students and friends a rough cut of the video and I have notes to implement! I felt like it was all coming together and the suggestions I received are really helpful to make the video flow more like a film, less like a string of vignettes. The feedback from people who have no idea about the industry is crucial as they are essentially my audience on YouTube.

December 25th

Oh my dear...I am ready for the last sprint here! The past week has been n anon stop ride of editing and working on subtitles. Oh boy. I am so grateful for the help I am getting with the VFX and special effects which are so daunting to do, - I am adding new inserts of videos I have recorded this week, including those of MTL...this whole process is teaching me that a video really is a living animal, everyday brings new ideas...and the time is needed to make adjustments...even though one part of me just wants to say..enough. But I want it to live on, and change as I am also thinking of my text, and I know what need to be added on top of the comments and edits I will get from Yasmin tomorrow!

December 27th

So I have a plan now and a tangible timeline and actions to implement immediately. I am working on them now, and it feels like it is actually real.

I am really excited to finish this work and seeing it come together is really wonderful. I am truly excited to bring it forward. Editing has been really time-consuming! Hours of time spent doing subtitles, and now exporting and realizing that the sound is not right, and credits need to be fixed...It really is a process. Editing my methodology and revisiting the idea of research-creation has been really helpful. Seeing how much I created and how the research WAS a creative process, and the text is the creation, while the video is also the research...into how to portray someone, stay entertaining, make a point, and yet leave ambiguity behind. I want my characters to be “characters” it is not mean to be social-realism. It is a tongue –in –cheek take on a media obsessed world, and the way we talk, share and learn. The women in the video, they are me, but they are also just ‘ideas”. Ideas change. And they should. I can see myself “performing”: when I watch them. Except with the RMOB herself. Only Aliona is somewhat real to me anyway. I can understand her, despite starting this journey with her being the FARTHEST from my experience. But now she is close to me, and Maighan, Jennifer and Jessica are “personae” and of course Svetlana....she is more of a real AVATAR speaking for a soulless and immense business, which looks innocent and “glossy” ...just like show business. The mammoth that can destroy lives, taking people’s dreams and owning them. All this because of it being essentially a BUSINESS. Always about the bottom line. And that I have seen from the inside of the acting business....So...Aliona is really the one I needed to come across as human. While being completely fictional, she is me had I stayed in Moscow. I really feel her inner struggle, and although I do not feel the same need for purpose, nor is my idea of purpose involving a family, I

understand that what it really is – a desire to express love. And that I will always feel is the only reason to live. To be the change you want to see- be the love you want to experience. And she is actively “doing” something to achieve that, even if – in my opinion her way is stemming greatly from cultural and social conditioning. So let us see how we can create more change by being the change and stopping our “trying” to change others and other people’s ideas. Just do something differently. Even if it seems crazy and useless. One only has one life. And in the end...what will be left of you? Once all your ideas and plans and identifications with “personality” are gone? Once your body is gone? All goes. And all changes every moment. The only constant is awareness, and that we share with each other. And that is love.

This project is a product of my perception, and this too will change. However, in seeing how much my opinions have transformed in just twelve months, I am so curious and excited to see how I learn and change as I have become more critical and aware of the media’s power over my ideas, my behavior, even my feelings. Working on this project has put a lot of my decisions under a new, fresh perspective. I want to know the WHY behind my actions. I do not care about what I do, as much as how I do it, and I trust the spontaneity of a sudden interest in something as something worth investigating. Looking at the way Russian women are seen, speaking to other, asking them about RMOBs, has been a sad experience- people know very little, but they all think that that is all they NEED to know, since no one really questions this industry. Which makes sense. It is a hidden layer. How many more are there? What am I not paying attention to, when I make up my ideas about the OTHER, whoever that may be? And WHERE are these ideas coming from? Who is talking? What’s at stake? And who BENEFITS? All of this will stay with me, as I go on with my work, in whatever way it manifests. Keep being aware, keep asking and stay open to ANOTHER perspective. , Tomorrow I may become the exotic OTHER. Well, I am already, but it can be taken to uncomfortable level, and I must be aware that this is how the majority of immigrant women feel most of the time. Another situated knowledge, which I do not need to understand I just need to make space for it, in my field of experience. We are all in this together, and attention and awareness of the unique experience of the OTHER is where we start building a new social consciousness, of which I already see glimpses. I am optimistic, I believe we all just want to be understood, and looking into a subject removed from our experience – in my case the RMOBs, is instrumental in reminding oneself to pay attention and to stay aware of the mind’s tricks. That is key.