

Bureaucratic Emotionalities Managing Files, Forms, and Delays in the Canadian Spousal Reunification Process

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Article abstract

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Bureaucratic Emotionalities

Managing Files, Forms, and Delays in the Canadian Spousal Reunification Process

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Abstract: Based on an ethnographic study of Canadian women's intimate relationships with a racialized man from the Global South, this article focuses on their experiences of the spousal reunification process. More specifically, I examine how the women emotionally and materially engage with spousal reunification procedures and administrative temporalities and how interactions with the Canadian immigration bureaucracy affect their subjectivity as women and citizens. I look at three embodied modes of involvement with bureaucratic procedures—waiting, working and fighting—each bringing forth its own set of emotions and creative coping strategies. I argue that love is central to the experience of the administrative procedures, as an ideological and technological tool used both by the state to regulate and discredit non-desirable relationships and by applicants to make sense of their position (of vulnerability) and to create meaningful narratives within state-imposed categories. A form of defensive agency emerges in women whose enormous application files, filled with “proof” of the authenticity of their relationship, shows how they have endorsed social anxieties about North-South intimacies and the strategies they have developed in order to legitimize their union.

Keywords: bureaucracy; agency; immigration; emotions; binational couples; Canada

Résumé : Sur la base d'une étude ethnographique des relations intimes qu'entretiennent des femmes canadiennes avec des hommes racisés du Sud global, cet article examine l'expérience que font ces femmes du processus de regroupement des conjoints. Plus précisément, il explore la manière dont celles-ci composent émotionnellement et matériellement avec les procédures de regroupement des conjoints et les temporalités administratives ainsi que la façon dont leurs interactions avec la bureaucratie de l'immigration canadienne affectent leur subjectivité en tant que femmes et citoyennes. L'article explore

trois modes incarnés de rapport aux procédures bureaucratiques – l’attente, le travail et la lutte –, chaque mode produisant une gamme d’émotions et de stratégies d’adaptation créatives. Je soutiens que l’amour est au cœur de l’expérience des procédures administratives en tant qu’outil idéologique et technologique utilisé à la fois par l’État pour réguler et discréditer les relations non désirables et par les candidats pour donner un sens à leur position (de vulnérabilité) et pour créer des récits significatifs dans le cadre des catégories imposées par l’État. Une forme d’agentivité défensive prend forme chez ces femmes, dont les énormes dossiers d’immigration remplis de « preuves » de l’authenticité de leur relation montrent qu’elles ont intégré les inquiétudes de la société quant aux intimités Nord-Sud et développé des stratégies pour légitimer leur union.

Mots-clés : bureaucratie ; agentivité ; immigration ; émotions ; couples binationaux ; Canada

“We have listened to Canadians and are delivering results. Bringing families together makes for a stronger Canada. Canadians who marry someone from abroad shouldn’t have to wait for years to have them immigrate or be left with uncertainty in terms of their ability to stay. What we’re announcing today is a more efficient, more considerate process to reunite families”¹
–John McCallum, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, 2017.

“I am discouraged. I have been deep into paperwork for the past two years and I have the impression that nothing has budged”
–Facebook post from a woman sponsoring her husband’s immigration to Canada, March 2017; my translation.

Introduction

As these two quotations show, significant discrepancies exist between official discourses and policies around family reunification and lived experiences of binational couples. Applying for spousal reunification or for the regularization of a non-citizen spouse’s residence papers are complex and time-consuming processes (see Odasso, this issue), generating a range of conflicting emotions for applicants who must simultaneously cope with a long-distance relationship (Bélanger and Candiz 2019; Geoffrion 2018). When the spouse comes from

the global South (Charsley 2012; Satzewich 2015a; Wray 2012), fears of the non-Western racialized “Other” (S. Hall 1992) permeate the supposedly neutral and equitable laws of immigration bureaucracies of many nation-states (Muller Myrdahl 2010; Pratt and Thompson 2008; Satzewich 2014). Immigration agents, called “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 2010), are not immune to prejudice. With their discretionary power (Haince 2014) they have a significant impact on family reunification claims, where decisions are based on personal judgment, intuition, or “feeling” (Maskens 2015; Murray 2014a) and on a sense of civic responsibility that reproduces national ideals of whiteness (Lavanchy 2013; Sharma 2006). Hence, “officers working at passport control scrutinize incomers as ‘potential cheats’ who need to be exposed before they endanger legal citizens” (Svašek 2010, 872).

When spousal reunification processes serve to exclude non-desirable migrants from the nation, what happens to their non-migrating spouse (Moret, Andrikopoulos and Dahinden 2019)? Where such processes are also highly gendered (Charsley and Wray 2015), how are women nationals affected by the spousal reunification process and how do they deal with its different technologies of exclusion? This article examines how white Canadian women who become the immigration “sponsors” of their non-Western husbands engage with spousal reunification bureaucracy in Canada and how these interactions affect their subjectivity as women and citizens. I focus on three embodied modes of involvement with bureaucratic procedures: waiting, working and fighting. Each brings forth a set of emotions and creative coping strategies. Love is central to these experiences. Love is an ideological and technological tool used by the state to regulate non-desirable relationships, and by applicants to make sense of their vulnerable positions and to create meaningful narratives within state-imposed categories.

“Authenticity” and Love in Marriage Migration

“‘Non-authentic marriage.’ That’s the reason they always give...”

—Facebook post from the administrator of a support group for Canadian women, 2016.

Complex articulations between feelings of love and affection, ideals of modernity, and desires for comfort and security have been shown to form the basis of many transnational intimacies (Bloch 2011; Constable 2003; Esara 2009; Faier 2007; Johnson-Hanks 2007; Padilla 2007; Patico 2009). What constitutes an “authentic marriage” is by no means universal (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Wardlow and

Hirsch 2006), for state actors or individuals in binational relationships. The question of the authenticity of binational marriages is often aggravated within administrative processes necessary for the immigration of non-Western spouses to Western countries. Bureaucratically, marriages are deemed authentic when conforming to moral ideals of (romantic) love—conceived as self-realization, passion, emotional and material interdependence (Alberoni 1995; Giddens 1992; Illouz 1997; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006)—often in opposition to instrumental considerations attributed to non-Western spouses. Authenticity linked to intimacy is particularly salient within a “moral economy of suspicion” (D’Aoust 2017). Fuelled by a language of crime and criminality, family migrants from the Global South² are increasingly conceived of as “fraudsters” (Delaunay 2006), “border-artists” (Beck-Gernsheim 2011) or “romantic entrepreneurs” (Dahles and Bras 1999; Phillips 2002) ready to do anything, even to feign love, in order to get a visa and access to a rich country. The perceived “deficit of legitimacy” (Rea and Tripiet 2010) of non-Western spouses justifies the restriction of marriage migration and the state intrusions into couples’ intimate lives (Salcedo Robledo 2013; Satzewich 2014).

Thus, romantic love has become a moral standard central to the family immigration policies of Western nation-states (Mai and King 2009; Maskens 2013; Fassin 2010), used to evaluate and often discredit North-South couples applying for reunification (Eggebo 2013; Foblets and Vanheule 2006). However, how do “Western” states gauge the level of love necessary to dispel doubt of the marital intentions of the non-Western spouse? Immigration agents often rely on their gut “feeling” (Maskens 2015; Murray 2014b), based on an ethnocentric conception of emotions and feelings (Lutz and White 1986). Anne-Marie D’Aoust (2013) has developed the concept of “technologies of love” to refer to these administrative tools and sets of criteria that state agencies use to assess the authenticity of binational relationships. Technologies of love force couples to quantify, through receipts, pictures, conversation excerpts, and other material evidence, romantic intimacy. Photographs (for example, body posture, clothes, people, and background), the coherence of both conjugal partners’ life and love stories, and cultural and religious “compatibility” are all scrutinized (Satzewich 2014). The whole file should exude a “feeling” of genuineness that can be “felt” by immigration agents and third parties such as lawyers (D’Aoust 2018). The focus on romantic love as a symbol of an authentic marriage within immigration bureaucratic processes in Western Nation-States puts pressure on binational couples to perform their intimacy on paper. But, as Friedman (2010) explains, authenticity criteria are not fixed in time and place and are often reconstructed through the

bureaucratic encounter in which narratives and material evidence are crafted in response to specific “truth demands” made by the immigration authorities. In her ethnographic work with bureaucrats in Belgium, Maskens (2013) remarks that too much or too little “proof” can be read as signs of inauthenticity. Hence, the definition of a “real marriage” is partly determined by power relations in which applicants are in a position of vulnerability: “expectations that statements take a certain form are already embedded in power relations that deny to those who must speak the truth the ability to define the content of the categories themselves” (Friedman 2010, 172).

However, when immigration agents use internalized “racialized [and gendered] knowledges” (Pratt and Thompson 2008) to determine the authenticity of a spousal reunification claim, applicants devise strategies to overcome administrative barriers. Encounters with bureaucratic apparatuses thus contribute to administrative literacy and agency, even while involving “self-monitoring” (Murray 2016, 471) in the representation of intimate relationships. With the increased circulation of practical, legal, and informal immigration knowledges in the general population afforded by information and communication technologies (Dekker and Engbersen 2016), migrants have access to more resources than ever before. They build on the experience of other applicants in order to avoid pitfalls and increase their chances of success. This paper addresses how applicants use existing administrative categories and moral expectations regarding love and conjugality to navigate immigration bureaucratic processes. It examines how Canadian women make use of “technologies of love” to dispel the shadow of immorality that weighs heavily on their relationship.

White Femininities, Love and the Spousal Reunification Process

The question of marriage migration in couples composed of a white Western man and a woman from a less developed country, who often met via match-making agencies (Brigham and Adibi 2009; Merali 2010), has been widely studied. While literature addresses the vulnerable status of migrant wives (Merali 2009), the perceived instrumentality of such relationships (Patino 2009), and the scrutiny of love by immigration authorities (Constable 2003), binational couples where the woman is a citizen of a Western country and is the “sponsor” of her foreign husband have not received much attention to date. Such conjugal configurations upset the foundations of family reunification processes based on the male breadwinner stereotype (Staver 2010). However, the history of Western nations controlling their female citizens’ sexuality and formal unions through laws and

disciplinary measures to ensure the reproduction of the nation's racial and gendered ideals is well documented—including removing the citizenship of women who married foreigners (Guerry 2016; Stoler 2002; Yuval-Davis 1997). Extra pressure is put on women who sponsor their husband's immigration (Dragojlovic 2008; R. Hall 2002). In the Canadian immigration system, white women's sexuality and marriage remains scrutinized (Deliovsky 2009; Sharma 2006, 131), especially when women's relationships do not conform to social norms (Bonjour and de Hart 2013; Kofman 2004).

Spousal Reunification in Canada: The Context

Immigration numbers in Canada have been relatively stable for the past 20 years. Roughly 250,000 immigrants are given permanent residence permits to Canada every year. In 2015, 17 percent of all landed immigrants (46,356 individuals) were the spouses of Canadian citizens or permanent residents. 42 percent of these spousal migrants were men. Despite seemingly impressive numbers, and the governmental discourse that “family reunification is a key immigration commitment,”³ immigration quotas for family migrants have been reduced by over 40 percent since 1992 in order to privilege economic migrants (Satzewich 2015b). In Québec, where the majority of my research participants live, the new government wishes to further increase skilled migration admission quotas at the expense of families and refugees (CBC 2019).⁴ Such a measure would double the current processing delays of 15 months for family reunification files.

As mentioned, North-South relationships are often viewed as a threat to nation-states and their citizens. The government of Canada fuels such rhetoric. In 2012, the minister for immigration implied that many unscrupulous individuals were using Canadian society and its “generous immigration system” (Minister Jason Kenney, cited in Satzewich 2015b, 139), in order to justify the tightening of spousal reunification laws.⁵ A new immigration category called “conditional permanent residence” was created. This law was meant to prevent non-Canadians from abusing the trust and love of Canadian citizens: if the couple did not live together for at least two years after the arrival of the non-Canadian partner, or if they did not have a child together, the permanent resident status of the non-Canadian partner could be revoked by the immigration authorities.⁶ Moreover, in 2012, the conservative government launched a campaign that stigmatized certain binational unions. The official objective of that campaign was to sensitize citizens on the risks of marriage fraud and targeted binational couples where the non-Canadian partner was from the global South.

This bias against spouses coming from specific countries is also visible in the statistics of refusals. The Canadian immigration bureau in Ghana, which receives applications from the West African region, scores the highest rate of refusals for spousal reunification cases, with 42 percent of all applications rejected (Satzewich 2015b) (against a global refusal rate of 15 percent). In the Facebook group I observed for a year and a half, 33 percent of all members (60) who had submitted a spousal reunification file between 2010 and 2016 saw their claim rejected on the basis of “non-authentic marriage.”

These restrictive measures and the demonization of binational couples, especially for white (often older) women Canadian citizens partnered with a man from the Global South, have significantly impacted the lives of binational couples. Because being married to a Canadian citizen does not grant automatic legal stay to the non-Canadian partner, the couple must go through the immigration process to build a common household in Canada. According to a recent governmental evaluation of the family reunification program, married partners find that the whole process is “complex,” and that the language used in forms and documents is “difficult to understand” (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2014, 35-36). In addition, even if Canadian immigration agents say they are sensitive to cultural differences (Satzewich 2014) they still hold implicit bias. A woman in her fifties, divorced, mentioned on a post on Facebook that “culture” was used to discredit her relationship with her younger Moroccan husband, and that her spousal reunification claim was rejected based on the “difference of religion” and on the assumption that Muslim men do not marry divorced women. The woman further added that the immigration agent “denigrated” her marriage pictures because their outfit was not “traditional” enough. This racialized statement about a highly stigmatized group of men constitutes “racialized knowledges” (Pratt and Thompson 2008) that subject certain files to increased scrutiny and higher rejection rates.

Spousal Reunification: The Process

Spousal reunification is called “spousal sponsorship” by the Canadian immigration agency. Canadian citizens or permanent residents who start reunification procedures become the “sponsors” of their spouse’s immigration to Canada. Sponsors sign a contract with the government stressing their civil responsibility towards the immigration of their spouse. If the application is successful, sponsors are responsible for their spouse’s life and integration into Canadian society and for providing for their basic needs for a period of three years upon arrival.

Applying for spousal sponsorship requires a considerable monetary investment: the application fees plus related costs, such as the fees for medical certificates, police reports, translation services, and legal advice, can add up to between five and ten thousand Canadian dollars. It also demands significant time and energy: the file is composed of numerous forms, legal and medical reports, and other documents and “proof” of the authenticity of the relationship. The official processing time of the application is twelve months, but is often prolonged, especially if the claim is rejected and the sponsoring spouse decides to appeal to the decision or reapply.

Methodology

This article is based on an ethnographic research that examined Canadian women’s binational relationships with men from the Global South. It draws on the narratives of 27 women as well as on discussions posted online by members of a “closed”⁷ Facebook support group catering exclusively to “Canadian women sponsoring the immigration of their non-Canadian partner” (excerpt from the “group description”), in which I did participant observation for a period of 18 consecutive months between 2015 and 2017. The interviews I conducted with the women were very emotional. Emotions translated mainly into tears in response to the feeling of loss and longing for the loved one(s), and from frustration due to the immigration process. Fieldwork in the Facebook group revealed how emotions were conveyed through words and “emojis.” I came into this group both as an academic and as a participating member, although I rarely interacted with members (for similar methods, see Constable 2003).

The objective of the group was to provide concrete immigration tips, guidance, and support, as well as an emotional outlet for their members. It was composed of an average of 110 more or less active members during my observation period and counted 209 members as of July 2019. The description of the group indicated that it was for broadly identifying “Canadian women,” but a majority of the women were white Canadian-born women from the province of Québec. The language of the group and discussions is French, which restricts access to English-speaking Canadian women.

The socio-demographic profiles of the women were varied. Between 18 and 72 years old, they came from a variety of social backgrounds: some were highly educated professional women, others had secondary school education. Some were unemployed. They lived in urban and rural areas. Some met their partners while doing international work in Africa or South America, but many had never

travelled internationally before meeting their partner. Most of them met their partner online, some while playing poker. The Facebook group was far from the stereotype of “the older white woman who meets a young muscular pool boy in an all-inclusive resort,” though I encountered such cases as well. Although profiles were diverse, women’s experiences of the Canadian spousal reunification process revealed many commonalities.

In Québec, there is no income threshold to be eligible to sponsor a spouse from outside. As such, women in precarious financial situations nevertheless qualify for spousal reunification. However, the application fees and associated requirements are a financial burden on the sponsoring partner. Literacy is also necessary to navigate the administrative procedures. Claimants who do not have sufficient understanding of the written languages and of formal document(ing) processes are thus excluded (Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018). Often, the Canadian women took charge of the application process with little help from their non-Canadian husbands because they were comfortable with Canadian administration, and they financed the immigration project.

The husbands of the women in the Facebook group were mainly Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian men.⁸ Very often, the men had less formal education than their wives, held precarious jobs in their country of origin and were also younger than their wives. The precarious situation and dependent position of the Canadian women’s husbands constitute a reversal of traditional gender roles, while gender ideologies still structure Canadian institutions and administrative processes. Most had never travelled outside the region where they lived, and evidently, they had never visited their wives’ country of origin before starting the reunification procedures. As such, most weddings took place in the country of the man, surrounded by his family and sometimes, a few significant members of the Canadian woman’s family. The marriages were often elaborate traditional weddings. Because the Canadian women had immigration requirements in mind, it was important that their marriage was officially recognized in their husband’s country of origin. A few wealthier women enjoyed multi-sited marriage ceremonies.

I use the term “partner” to echo the Canadian government’s terminology. The term is inclusive of different types of unions recognized by the state for immigration purposes. It includes married couples (“spouses”), common-law partnerships and non-married “conjugal partners”⁹ who have not lived together for a period of one year but can prove continued intimacy. I also sometimes refer to “lovers,” a term that is mainly used by the research participants to talk

about their husbands. This term further shows the importance of the trope of romantic love in the daily lives of the women, who also call themselves “les amoureuses” on the Facebook group. Moreover, the Facebook group reproduces the heteronormative script embedded in Canadian society and in the spousal reunification process, despite its accessibility to same-sex partners. This is obvious in the group’s introduction description— “pour des femmes qui parrainent leurs maris”—but also, in the language used in the discussions between members, which implicitly conveys that they are all in a relationship with a man.

Bureaucratic Time and Waiting: Exacerbated Emotions

M: We are nearing the end of the 12-month waiting period, so I am expecting to be called for an interview any time from now.

K: So, you are on the alert now?

M: Yes and actually, it is distressing! That’s what I find the most difficult! I don’t check anymore...I used to go to the website all the time to check my status, but not anymore. Now I open the first page of Canada Immigration, I look at the last time it was updated and if it is not that same day...Because you have to enter all your personal data and at the end, nothing! So now, I don’t do it anymore. My husband goes 3 times a day. I am afraid it will affect him psychologically. Every time he checks, and it is negative, he gets angry! (Melanie, 38 years old, in a relationship for five years, interviewed in April 2015)

Waiting for a decision on one’s immigration claim, even when the person making the claim is “at home” (Kwon 2015) has several implications. First, waiting means being in a constant state of alert. In this era of instantaneity afforded by information and communication technologies, days and months spent waiting for a sign from the Canadian immigration agency seem even longer when it is possible to check one’s immigration status online 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Bureaucratic temporalities structure the daily life of applicants. The bureaucratic process can easily become an obsession and waiting is thus textured by all the emotional states it creates, from hope to despair, to frustration (Griffiths 2014; Kobelinsky 2010). The following post by a woman who had submitted her application a month earlier illustrates the emotional intensity generated by the bureaucratic experience:

You will say that I am crazy hihihhi! I have just received the acknowledgement of receipt from the immigration and I am mad as a hatter!

Imagine what it will be when I am further down the road in the process!
Have a good day, girls!

Member comment 1: I am not laughing at you. I cried when I got my acknowledgement of receipt!

Member comment 2: It's crazy how immigration drives us nuts!

In this case, waiting time was punctuated by notices from the immigration agency, which created euphoria in the women. But there were also long periods of time where women did not hear from the immigration agency. Their file stalled; their online status not updated. Waiting during these periods showed itself to be difficult. Anxiety set in. The posts on the Facebook group became more tense. Delays in responses and lost files further lengthened the processing time. One member of the Facebook group, Rita, suffered as a result of the many mistakes made in the handling of her file by immigration agents. The following post, published on Facebook in August 2017, illustrates Rita's frustration:

I requested the immigration agent's interview notes in June. No news (they have 30 days to send them). Got the email yesterday: they had lost my request and are currently filling it as priority (we shall see how long for their priority). Question: Are they fooling us? The more they delay, the more time I waste. Really disgusted.

In this case, Rita acutely felt her vulnerability in the hands of the state, her lack of power. Delays and waiting time are often used by states and bureaucrats as a means to exercise power over their citizens (Auyero 2011; Turnbull 2016). Administrative delays accentuated the Facebook group women's feelings of helplessness and frustration because they felt stuck. The long file processing times evoked many negative feelings—stress, anxiety, anger, depression, obsession, frustration, and panic.

Anthropologist Alice Elliot describes Moroccan women waiting for their migrant husbands as “paused subjects” (Elliot 2015). As long as they are waiting, they can never start living a “normal life.” Their status as wives is put on hold until the migration that will reunite them with their husband takes place. The Canadian women I interviewed also described their life during this period of waiting as being put “on standby”: they literally stand by their computers or mailboxes, waiting for an answer from the Canadian authorities. Some wanted to have a child or sell their house, but because they were waiting for an answer from the Canadian immigration agency, they felt they had to wait. Melanie, quoted earlier,

said, “I want to build something, have another child, but I can’t. I am being put on hold. And it bothers me because I feel I am wasting some precious years.” As Kwon puts it, it is not the present, but the future that is “suspended” (2015, 488).

For Canadian women, waiting for the decision from the immigration agency was time spent outside social time. Like the Moroccan women in Elliot’s research, my interlocutors could not continue to live normally: their status as wife, but also as a worker and as citizen, was tainted by the liminal period that might or might not bring the desired change in their social status. Their access to full citizenship was curtailed by the State through immigration bureaucracy, notably in the area of conjugality, where their right to choose the partner of their choice and actualize their marital union by building a life together in Canada was being withheld.

Because family migrants’ eligibility is primarily based on the perceived “authenticity” of their relationship with a Canadian, once a couple begins the reunification process, their relationship is subject to suspicion on the part of the authorities. The act of waiting was not an innocent matter; rather, it became a period filled with anxiety. The process is thus more than a simple entrance formality, as it would impact the women’s intimate life and sense of self. The women missed their husbands’ physical presence, but they were also awaiting the official verdict about their intimate relationship. Their relation to time was transformed, charged with expectations and hopes, but also fears: As women in love, they might have missed cues about their partner’s most intimate intentions. Every interaction with their partner was perceived in terms of “authenticity points” for their immigration file. They calculated what to say or text, the pictures they took. They documented their intimacy in a thorough and systematic manner.

The question forming the basis of the reunification project shifted from “Can my husband come to Canada to be with me?” to “Am I in a ‘true’ relationship?” and was a significant source of apprehension for the women, casting a shadow over their relationship. Véronique’s doubts about the intentions of her Cuban husband remained present years after he settled in Canada:

I had no doubt, but still today...so many of them come here and then run away to the US that even though he has been with me for a year... I joke with him, but there is a little bit of truth: ‘You will not run away in the woods at night, right?’ I am 99 percent sure of him, but there is always that damn one little percent. A little doubt that maybe he is here for the sake of his permanent residence and not for me...

Waiting time became loaded with anxiety because of the uncertainty of the outcome, but also because of the strain put on the relationship by “technologies of love” (D’Aoust 2013). By putting the emotional state of the women sponsors to the test and creating a legitimate “doubt,” the immigration bureaucracy exerts power over its citizens into their intimate lives.

Time spent waiting is not necessarily wasted time regarding bureaucratic procedures. As Belanger and Candiz, who examined the experience of the reunification process with grandparents explain, “‘waiting’ involves the deployment of strategies to reduce and end ‘waiting’ (...) In the case of legal migration, agency during ‘waiting’ is bureaucratic and administrative and involves sense-making and information-digging” (2019, 4). In the face of intimidating administrative procedures and delays, women sponsors expressed agency several ways: building and accessing support networks; circulating relevant information concerning the immigration process to other women sponsors; making follow-up calls; developing strategies to avoid pitfalls and meet the immigration expectations; consulting experts; and, engaging in the administrative “work” (Geoffrion 2017, 2018). However, the long waiting period between the start of the process and the reception of the official decision often left women financially depleted and emotionally drained.

Working: “It’s a Full-Time Job”

When I met Isabelle, she was preparing her file for the second time. Her first claim for reunification with her Moroccan husband had been refused: The relationship was not “authentic” enough, by Canadian immigration standards. Isabelle decided to try again, using her first experience to build a stronger case. In her words,

The sponsorship process is really tough. This year has been rough. I think about it all the time: the documents, the steps. You might not be able to tell, but a reunification file takes a minimum of two months of work, 40 hours a week. Papers, proof, this, that... The last photo album, I created it like a book. Now, I am going to make another one with all the Skype and Facetime pictures we took.

As Isabelle’s experience shows, the spousal reunification administrative process, with its bureaucratic steps and file preparation, became “a full-time job”. When Simone, married to an Algerian man, was preparing her application she published a post on the Facebook support group, which received much feedback:

I told myself I would work on my file to have it done as soon as possible, but I am disheartened. I have more than 10,000 photos, 10,000 pages of Facebook conversation, 1,800 pages of text messages, 600 pages of Skype log, I have proof for eight trips (that is at least 100 to 200 documents, including all the receipts I haven't finished scanning yet). In addition, I have to report all presents and letters sent and received, and all my phone calls since 2012 (...) I also have to get the letters members of my family have promised to write and finish writing my own introduction letter. I feel a bit overwhelmed and I haven't even started filling out the forms! And I am afraid I will forget something. I think I am going to put everything aside for tonight because right now, I just feel like crying. You know, when you want everything to be perfect for your file, but it is just so much work!

Member comment: Good luck! It took me a full year to prepare my file!

This conversation also highlights how communication technologies facilitate the growth of intimacy between partners during times of physical separation (Baldassar et al. 2016; Geoffrion 2016; Madianou and Miller 2013). Yet the extensive use of communication technologies creates an additional challenge. Text messages, phone calls, Skype or Facetime meetings form a monstrous quantity of evidence of conjugal intimacy. To sort through all this material evidence requires effort to reveal the “genuine” nature of their relationship.

The process is time-consuming also because of its complexity. Women compared the administrative procedures to a “complex and draining” ordeal where contradictory directives or false information were commonplace and often led to dead ends. A Facebook conversation illustrates the confusion that was a common experience: “Immigration Canada will drive me crazy. I sent them an email to ask where my file stood, and they answered that I had 30 days to provide several documents and to pay the immigration fees. But I have already paid the fees and given my declaration.”

The amount of work needed to prepare a “good” file added emotional and symbolic value to the spousal reunification project and to Canadian citizenship, to the extent that some women called it their “biggest life project.” Many admitted how they neglected other aspects of their lives, including their children, in order to dedicate themselves to this administrative step. Johanne, married to a Malian man, felt the procedures created an aura of importance around her relationship, despite the everyday difficulties she faced with her husband:

It is interminable! Brothers and sisters, nephews... It never ends. And I entered the name of the child and I asked him, 'He really is your brother's child? Because I have put him in that box...' And it is so important, because that is what will allow you to get a passport. It's all very solemn. You have to take an oath. I wanted everything to be perfect. I was shaking at every letter I wrote on the forms.

The bureaucratic reunification project served to reify the relationship. Some relationships that women considered problematic and non-sustainable were transmuted through the bureaucratic procedures into idealized ones. When Stephanie, who had lived unhappily with her partner in Benin for two years, finally won her case after two tries and more than a year, she felt that her relationship became "re-idealized" through the distance and through the imaginative work deployed during the extensive waiting times (see Geoffrion and Cretton, this issue). Her words, "It has been accepted. They are granting my husband a visa. Oh! I am supposed to be happy," suggests how her focus on "winning her case" was a pipe dream.

By stressing the legal and civil responsibility of sponsors, immigration processes constantly confront women with the "risks" involved in sponsoring their non-Canadian spouse. Many women developed contradictory feelings between their love for their partner and their civil responsibility as Canadian citizens. Their desire to build a shared household in Canada bumped up against legal and financial pressure that bound the women to the State, if their marriage ended. With its focus on the authenticity of the relationship, the bureaucratic process altered the quality of the relationship, forcing women to consider the eventuality of a "fraudulent" marriage. At the same time, the work reified the intimate relationship, putting it above everyday concerns. Performing emotional labour (Hochschild 1983), white Western spouses of racialized men from the South tried to convince the immigration authorities of the genuine nature of their union. Such labour necessitates bureaucratic literacy, which draws out the women's self-awareness of their vulnerability. Engaging in administrative formalities required women to display a form of *defensive agency* as they interpreted subtext in official documents and responded appropriately to expectations of "authentic" marriages. As Cynthia said, she had to guess at the expectations of immigration agents in charge of her file and had to make strategic (moral)

choices in the evidentiary reconstruction of their binational relationship in order to “make everything perfectly perfect.”

Fighting: The Battle of the Sacred and the Profane

“Love is stronger than time, distance, problems and, most of all, immigration!”

—Facebook post, March 2016.

Women sponsors were not passive victims of the State’s administrative tools, however. They acted upon the bureaucratic process and used “technologies of love” to re-articulate their relationship on moral grounds. “Authenticity work” made ideals of romantic love the benchmarks by which relationships were reconstructed to persuade immigration agents.

Notions of sacrifice and perseverance inherent to love stories *à la* Romeo and Juliette were employed by women to legitimize their relationship. Women sponsors used their bureaucratic ordeal to prove the authenticity of their relationship using the state’s criteria. Extensive waiting and its induced suffering was used to build a stronger argument, as “waiting out” was imbued with heroism (Hage 2009), “especially when endured through the hands of higher administrative powers” (Kwon 2015, 479). The Facebook support group as a collective made use of its shared experience to buttress women’s individual spousal reunification claims. They developed a lexicon of “the battle,” where the sacred—love embodied by their binational marriage—battles the profane—the Canadian immigration bureaucracy questioning their love. Women used notions of sacrifice and perseverance to prove the authenticity of their relationship. Because their relationship “survived” the immigration ordeal, women were able to reconstruct their relationship as strong and durable, and thus, as authentic. One woman’s experience of multiple refusals sheds light on that process of legitimation:

My dear, I have been there too. We were so discouraged. We even thought it was all over. But my husband understood that immigration would not separate us. We came back stronger than ever. The second refusal, we stood firm and we told ourselves that if we lived through all this and were still together, it is because we were meant for each other. Now we are going on appeal and nothing will stop us. If your love is strong enough, you will find each other without a doubt, and you will

continue to fight to be reunited. In my case, if the appeal does not work, I will move to Morocco. Immigration will not destroy our relationship, our lives, our happiness...

A feeling of adversity encountered in the Canadian immigration bureaucracy generates a “heroic” narrative of endurance. The adversity she faced led to determination and the conviction that her quest to be reunited with her husband was worth the fight, because it was based on love. Emotions figured predominantly in the Facebook discussions and became “moral” (Haidt 2003) when used by women sponsors to strengthen their position against an unfair system. By highlighting the emotional and financial risks involved, the project took on new amplitude and became a collective claim against the immigration bureaucracy, in the name of a higher moral good, idealized love. The spousal reunification projects were engrossed with sacredness that placed couples high above the mundaneness of bureaucracy. Many women referred to sacred or religious figures such as Allah when commenting on their own and others’ reunification experiences. The transmutation of the spousal reunification process into the realm of the sacred in the women’s narratives accentuates the moral value of the binational couple and their plight, where the emotional labour further justified the validity of their claim. The adverse bureaucratic encounter became a means to enhance the authenticity capital of their otherwise stigmatized relationship. Those who persevered despite the obstacles gained credibility in the eyes of the online community and in the eyes of immigration agents, which in part led to the higher rate of success with second reunification attempts.

Nevertheless, Facebook group members felt pressure to conform to “acceptable narratives”¹⁰ that emphasize romantic love. As such, the bureaucratic encounters contributed to the reproduction of stereotypes of “emotional” white Western women (Frohlick 2009; Stevi Jackson 1993), and subjectivities. The ideals of romantic love and women in need of patriarchal protection were rarely questioned by the women in the Facebook group, as demonstrated by this publication: “Us women, we are a bit naive, sometimes. We have to protect women from themselves, sometimes. Perhaps immigration agents are more objective and see things they [the women] can’t see.”

Conclusion

Canadian women married to men from the Global South engaged with the Canadian spousal reunification procedures by waiting, working, and fighting. All three modes of involvement with the bureaucracy highlight the central place

of love in the immigration process. Through administrative formalities, love became a tool of exclusion/inclusion to the Canadian nation and also shaped women's subjectivities and created meaningful narratives to legitimize women's otherwise stigmatized relationships with a non-Canadian racialized man. When faced with the state's scrutiny of North-South relationships, Canadian women applying for reunification exploited the ideology of heteronormative love—translated into material evidence to further support their claim. However, the substantial amount of emotional labour needed to justify women's reunification claims contributed to an extreme emotionality of the process. The procedure constructed “women in love” as irrational and thus vulnerable beings, and reproduced normative understandings of gender, conjugality, and feminized love (Frohlick 2009; Stevi Jackson 1993; D'Aoust 2018). The Facebook support group echoed the idea that love and marriage were inseparable from women's happiness (Geoffrion 2018).

The bureaucratic encounter process also makes visible the gendered and racial relations of power that structure the women sponsors' experience of spousal reunification. Not only non-Western and racialized would-be citizens became the object of suspicion in this immigration process. The white Canadian spouse was also turned into a second-class citizen through the various administrative techniques. Extensive delays in file processing and authenticity requirements made explicit the precariousness of Canadian women's taken-for-granted rights as citizens. Their right to form a family with the partner of their choice was questioned and their social status and full participation in social life were put on hold. The lived encounter with bureaucratic processes produces, as Hull puts it, “ambiguous political subjects, part supplicant, part citizen” (Hull 2012, 256).

However, the affective states and intense emotions generated by documents and bureaucratic practices also increased actors' bureaucratic agency. A form of defensive agency emerged in applicants whose enormous application files were filled with evidence of the authenticity of their relationship. Such agency suggests both social anxiety about North-South intimacies and strategies developed to legitimize women's union. The emotionality of the immigration process¹¹ was used strategically by Canadian women to recast their transnational relationship on a moral and sacred ground, even as the process troubled the supposed intentions of their partner. Mundane administrative practices that were transmuted into “the sacred” (that is, mystical powers) reveals the transformative potential of bureaucratic emotionalities to be mobilized into positive action.

For women sponsors, the potential of emotionally challenging encounters with Canadian immigration bureaucracy was magnified through the online community of affect, fuelling the righteousness of the women's conjugal and immigration project, and became a moving force (Svašek 2008). However, access to spousal reunification remains imbalanced. The white Canadian women who participated in this study were all privileged enough to be literate in the French language and in information and communication technologies, which facilitated their access to expertise and support and thus increased their leverage power with the Canadian bureaucracy.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2016/12/government-canada-delivering-faster-processing-shorter-wait-times-spousal-reunification.html> (accessed 25 October 2018)

² Unsurprisingly, the same language of crime and criminality in the security-migration management nexus is also highly racialized and gendered. It is mainly associated with Black and Arab or Muslim men (Helleiner 2012; Kitossa and Deliovsky 2010; Pratt and Thompson 2008). If Canadian immigration policies and measures are supposed to be race-neutral, many scholars point to the slippage that often occurs between nationality, ethnicity and race, where nationality is now a source of increased scrutiny at borders and is often conflated with race (Fernandez and Jensen 2014; Pratt and Thompson 2008, 627).

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/notice-faster-processing-times-spouses-partners.html> (accessed 15 February 2019).

- ⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-s-new-plan-to-fix-labour-shortage-will-create-two-tiered-immigration-system-ottawa-warns-1.5208857> (accessed 16 July 2019).
- ⁵ <https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2012/10/jig-up-marriage-fraud-says-minister-kenney.html> (accessed 15 February 2019)
- ⁶ This law was highly contested by feminist groups because it further vulnerabilized immigrant women who suffered violence from their sponsoring spouse. The measure was revoked in May 2017 (<https://www.canada.ca/fr/immigration-refugies-citoyennete/nouvelles/avis/elimine-rp-conditionnelle.html>).
- ⁷ When a Facebook group is “closed,” it means that individuals who wish to join have to send a membership request to the administrators, who will evaluate the claim before admitting the person into the group.
- ⁸ Even though I did not restrict the project to heterosexual couples, throughout the entire research project, I only came across one story of a North-South lesbian couple applying for reunification in Canada. I was told they had a difficult time trying to gather “proof” of their relationship in a context where homosexuality is criminalized.
- ⁹ This term was added to accommodate same-sex relationships whose union cannot be officially acknowledged in many countries. <https://www.immigration-quebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/immigrate-settle/family-reunification/requirements-sponsor/glossary.html> (accessed 18 July 2019).
- ¹⁰ I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this nuance.
- ¹¹ Pigg and colleagues state that the administrative murk is, in itself, productive as it “affords opportunities for both agency and ignorance within bureaucratic processes” (Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018, 175).

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