

The “Mail-Order bride”

Orientalism, Intimacy,
and Gendering Experience

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY AND CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

Signed

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ABSTRACT

By exploring forms of representation and the dynamic fluctuation of power, this thesis examines the “Mail-Order bride” as a concept, and a woman in the everyday. This research focuses on the questions: what is a Mail-Order bride? And to whom does this label get attributed to? By understanding how relationships between Asian women and Western men become categorized within the realm of inauthenticity and exploitation, this research locates the foundations for such representation to exist. With an interest in Filipino women in Australia, and the ways in which women are stereotyped as “Mail-Order brides,” this research aims to reinstate the role of women as agents by reiterating the importance of experience, and by challenging dominant representations of Mail-Order brides.

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INTRODUCTION: A MAIL-ORDER BRIDE BY ANY OTHER NAME WOULD JUST BE A WOMAN

My initial interest with the idea of the “Mail-Order bride” began with an awkward dinner party. While I was living in Horsham, Victoria during my anthropology internship, I met a Filipino woman who was working as a waitress in the local Chinese restaurant. During this dinner, her Anglo-Australian husband turns and says to me, “you know, Gloria, I always tell my friends to go to the Philippines to get a girlfriend or wife.”

The assumption is a nagging suspicion; this man has a Mail-Order bride.

It raised initial questions about power and authenticity. I was confronted with the complexity of how Asian women are perceived when in relationships with Western men. When access and mobility appears at an imbalance, we begin to assume that there exists exploitation; either domestic or at a global scale.

As such, my immediate response was that of repulsion; I felt uncomfortable with his statement directed as a compliment. Such a sentiment can only raise question after question about what it means to find an Asian wife.

This challenged me to consider the complex intersections of power that inform and are negotiated in relationships that first appear problematic to us. What makes a woman a Mail-Order bride, and how does it become identifiable within intimate relationships? How do particular forms of representation operate through pre-established ideas of power?

With this in mind, the foundation of this research rests on the question: Who does the label Mail-Order Bride get ascribed to and why? Relationships between White Western men and Asian women can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable because they represent stark imbalances between race, class, gender, nationality and mobility. The assumptions surrounding these relationships are what I interrogate, and the implication of navigating these differences in everyday situations.

The “Mail-Order bride” has been the topic of provocative discussions. The more prominent focuses have been around domestic violence, abuse, and human trafficking. However, while I understand the locus of the “Mail-Order bride” does include elements of exploitation, and violence, I am not pre-occupied with that particular kind of investigation. Rather, I am interested in the representational implications of Mail-Order brides, and the intersections of power which inform the way in which Mail-Order brides have been constructed conceptually. As such, my research method is to analyse the Mail-Order bride within Australia, and focus on questions of power, intimacy, authenticity, and gender. The purpose of my research is to provide a counter-narrative about the perceptions of Mail-Order brides by exploring the diversity of women’s experiences. Therefore, the notion of agency plays a significant role in my research.

Gayatri Spivak (1988) posed the question, “can the subaltern speak?” Her configuration of the subaltern was embodied by the female colonial subject; the Third World woman is trapped between patriarchy and imperialism, and fragmented in a liminal space of modernisation and tradition (Spivak 1988:102). For Spivak, the subaltern woman cannot speak. The Third World woman has to be reduced to a figure in the margins, a thing to be studied. Western academic thinking has reproduced the colonial gaze through knowledge. Research has defined the Other as the object of study to be brought back as knowledge for the West. The legacy of colonialism and imperialism has provided the language and the authority to speak for the Other woman, the Third World subject. When agency and dignity is not attributed to women who are the subject of research, it illuminates the issue of representation and what that representation seeks to legitimise.

The role of my research is to re-present the Mail-Order bride as an agent. This is vital to this thesis as I argue that women are often aware of the constraints of power in which they exist. Therefore, by demonstrating that women negotiate and navigate the intersections of power which occur when ascribed the “Mail-Order bride” label, I aim to provide both counter-narrative and counter-analysis to the dominant view that women who are labelled Mail-Order brides are exploited victims. While Asian women actively reject the label of Mail-Order bride, the label and stereotype itself demarcates inferiority. As such, I find it pertinent to use Mail-Order bride as a referent to a logic in relation to

power, and to interrogate how the notion of the Mail-Order bride exists within an Australian context. I assert that Filipino women have had the heavy burden of being typecast as Mail-Order brides, and this generates a particular attitude towards Filipino women as “dangerous women” or “women in danger” (Saroca 2006). With this in mind, this research wants to determine the root of this form of representation, and what it means for women who seem to embody the “ideal” Mail-Order bride.

Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* allows me to examine the historical establishment of East and West, and the way it has influenced ideas of unequal distributions of power by championing Western superiority over Asian inferiority. I will expand on Said’s work by looking at the gendered dimensions of Orientalism and how bodies are racialised and imbued with meaning in relation to different kinds of power. I argue that Orientalism provides the foundation to our contemporary attributions to where power lies, and how it operates. As such, the visual embodiments of East and West, Asian women and Western men, are considered unequal.

In the first chapter, I will look at representation and how Orientalism plays a significant role in how the power dynamics between Western men and Asian women can be traced to our perceptions of Orient and Occident. Representation takes form through both Orientalism and racialisation. Within this analysis, my research explores the Mail-Order bride by drawing on various theories including Stuart Hall’s (1997) theories on representation and Bell Hooks’s (1992) theories on race, and how they can be used to understand stereotyping and representations of Asian women. I expand on Said’s work by incorporating the gendered dynamics of Orientalism, and how power is coded on the body.

In chapter two, I explore intimacy and authenticity in regards to the Mail-Order bride. As women are perceived as commodities through orientalist and racialised depictions, the Mail-Order bride is a woman in constant scrutiny. My research aims to understand the representations of Mail-Order brides within an Australian context by exploring how Filipino women use online platforms to find potential partners. I consider the online realm as a site which facilitates mutually beneficial relationships, rather than a site where one may “buy a bride.” While marriage brokerage agencies operate worldwide, in Australia, Filipino women are generally stereotyped as Mail-Order brides. In this sense, I will look

at why and how Filipino women are implicated by the notion that they are “bought” online, and are inauthentic in their pursuit of Western partners. How theories of intimacy manifest within the logic of the Mail-Order bride industry is important to discuss as it informs the representation of women as commodities in exchange for intimacy. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how authenticity and inauthenticity, in relation to dominant narratives of intimacy, reinforce the notion that “Mail-Order brides” are women who engage in insincere relationships with Western men for money.

In the third chapter, I examine a case study of the “Mail-Order bride.” Using Mina Roces’s (2003) *Sisterhood Is Local: Women in Mount Isa*, I aim to situate Orientalism, intimacy, commodification, and gender negotiation into a conversation about agency and representation. In this sense, I want to emphasise the importance of experience, and the way in which resistance can be understood in relation to the Mail-Order bride label.

Overall, this thesis intends to unpack the use of racialised and gendered stereotypes and how it impacts Asian women who are labelled as “Mail-Order brides.” By doing so, this thesis provides an alternative perspective to the “Mail-Order bride” by focusing on agency and the experiences of Asian women.

1. YELLOW FEVER/YELLOW PERIL: ORIENTALISM, REPRESENTATION, AND THE MAIL-ORDER BRIDE

My childhood friend's parents divorced when she was quite young; her mother was Filipino and her father Anglo-Australian. Her father was in the military and met her mother while in the Philippines. She told me that her father spoke of her mother fondly, even after the divorce. Her father told her "I've never loved a woman like I loved your mother." I remember this story for two reasons; it was the first time I'd heard of divorce and because when I was much older, I understood the context in which her mother was held in contempt - an acquaintance from university told me that Filipino women only marry Australians for permanent residency or citizenship.

Perhaps, from the outside, my friend's parents looked like a Mail-Order marriage; a beautiful young Filipino woman and an Australian soldier marry, then divorce, thereby securing her citizenship in Australia. In this situation, marriage breakdown is attributed to dishonesty and deceit, instead of the unfortunate reality that some relationships do not last. Pairings between Asian women and White Western men are attributed a different set of meaning in relation to power due to representations of Asian women.

This chapter seeks to interrogate the dominant representations of Mail-Order brides and where the locus of power is held within orientalist imaginings of East and West. Marriages between Asian women and White Western men are often stigmatised and represented through negative stereotypes. While, perhaps, not all marriages or relationships are perfect, the assumption that pairings between Asian women and White Western men are more prone to breakdown and violence is based on our ideas of power imbalance and inequality.

Edward Said's (1978) writing on *Orientalism* will be useful in understanding how power and representation inform the Mail-Order bride. Orientalism provides the historical and imagined foundations for our conceptions about East and West. This forms the basis in determining what power relationships operate through Orientalism and what this means for representations of people who are attributed particular traits and circumstances based on the geographic abstraction of East and West.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the way in which the Orient and “Asianness” has been constructed in relation to the West, specifically in Australia. I will explore the intricate ways power is exercised, and the experiences that are silenced or are marginalised by representations of Mail-Order brides. Within the academic literature interested in Mail-Order brides, there is a particular investment in alleviating the harms and forms of violence that women experience (O’Rourke 2002) (So 2006) (Narayan 1995) (Sciachitano 2000). While abuse, domestic violence, and human trafficking are important issues to discuss within the complicated locus of the Mail-Order bride industry, this chapter and this thesis is not preoccupied with these issues in regards to Mail-Order brides. Rather, it will determine how the Mail-Order bride label is used and what it can reveal about power.

This chapter will demonstrate that Orientalism provides the foundation for prevailing stereotypes and representations of Asian identity, and the perception of Asian women as Mail-Order brides. It will then explore the effects that orientalist and racialised representations have on women who are considered Mail-Order brides. Finally, it will look at ways to understand women’s agency in relation to power and representation by providing counter-narratives which support non-Western perspectives of women. Overall, this chapter will introduce and explore representations of Mail-Order brides with the aim of reinstating and focusing on the agency of women.

Orientalism and Ambivalence: Yellow Fever/Yellow Peril

The term Mail-Order Bride contains negative connotations. It is considered a derogatory descriptor by people who are labelled “Mail-Order brides” or whose marriages are labelled “Mail-Order marriages” (Constable 2003:2) (Robinson 1996:2). Gaining traction in the 1970s and 1980s, “Mail-Order” derived from the primary use mail-order catalogues as introductions were made through letter-writing. These services often involved hefty costs on behalf of the men, feeding into the idea that these women were marrying wealthy men and were “bought” or “sold” as brides. In the advent of the Internet, the method of letter-writing was replaced by e-mail, online forums, and chat rooms. The term “Mail-Order bride” still maintains its linguistic potency, despite the practical change in communication methods.

“Mail-Order bride” is a demarcation of power, and its use here will be pertinent in the exploration of Asian women as Mail-Order brides. The use of “Mail-Order bride” and “Mail-Order marriage” will be used to highlight the power dynamics that these relationships seem to represent. “Mail-Order bride” captures the language used to conjure imaginings of helpless and desperate woman in need of rescue from impoverished surroundings. “Mail-Order bride” equally invokes the spectre of a woman who uses her feminine and exotic charms to manipulate and take advantage of her unassuming Western husband. This kind of representation marginalises the voices and perspectives of women, and deprives women of their agency by being reduced to one-dimensional tropes, often lacking the dignity of having diverse depictions of their experiences.

Within an Australian context, “Mail-Order bride” has been used as a pejorative for Filipino women (Robinson 1996). By examining how Filipino women are represented as Mail-Order brides and the way in which “Oriental” identities are constructed and imbued with meaning, we can locate representations of Mail-Order brides to a relationship of power within an Australian “Occidental” understanding of East and West. By using Orientalism to pinpoint where power is attributed in the construction of these relationships, I wish to demonstrate that the fascination with Mail-Order brides and Mail-Order marriages stem from the discomfort of necessitating disadvantage to Asian bodies.

For Edward Said (1978:2), Orientalism is expressed and represented through modes of discourse supported by “institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines.” Orientalism is connected to the historical process of European imperialism and colonialism, especially how the “Other” was understood and mediated for the West. The Orient was produced through Western thinking, both creatively and critically, and through avenues of formal and informal institutions of governing. It was a legitimisation of power and knowledge over the Orient, a relationship based on imbalance politically, culturally, morally, socially, and economically. Thus, Orientalism is a Western style of domination over the Orient (Said 1978:3).

Due to the progressive imbalance of forms of power (real and imagined), and the legitimisation of dominant views of the Orient, the world was divided based on the geographic distinction between Orient and Occident. The Orient was “produced and exists in an uneven exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial

establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what “we” do and what “they” do).” (Said 1978:12).

Power, as it is understood within the context of Orientalism, exists to legitimise the Occident by conceiving of an Orient which belongs beneath it, thereby ensuring a system which subjects and constrains the Oriental to be “Other.” Therefore, Said’s examination of Orientalism is related to the how power and knowledge supports and legitimises a centralised representation of the Orient.

According to Homi Bhabha (1983:25), Orientalism, as it is a colonial discourse, is better understood through ambivalence. Colonial discourse, as Bhabha (1983:26) argues, renders the colonial subject as the site of both fear and desire, not simply in direct opposition to a colonial master. This suggests that that difference, or Otherness, is contradictory and is strategically executed and readjusted depending on both historical and contemporary circumstances. Similarly, Fazal Rizvi, draws on Bhabha to argue that within an Australian setting, Orientalism exists as an ambivalent attitude towards “Otherness” since Australia has a strong identification with the West (Rizvi 1996:78). Due the history of European colonialism within Australia, Australia’s position as a Western nation within Asia illuminates Bhabha’s idea of the ambivalence towards the Other.

Australia’s apprehension towards its Asian neighbours is rooted within this divide of East and West, and it is not a recent occurrence. During late nineteenth century, Robin Gerster (2009:307) suggests that radical nationalism and identification with British imperialism rose within Australia due to its precarious position in Asia. Dating back to the Gold Rush era, “Yellow Peril” became the term to describe the fear of Oriental hordes overtaking Australia due to concerns of Chinese immigration. Australia’s situation highlights the aggression in which the divide between Orient and Occident manifests. In Europe, the Orient could be experienced or imagined as an exotic place “over there.” But with a strong identification to the Western world, Australia positions itself as not Oriental, but Occidental; a nation both in a position to dominate and be dominated.

As Gerster (2009:311) continues, the fear of Yellow Peril and invasion was also intimately associated with the Orient as a site for “unbridled lasciviousness.” He suggests that even though Asia was positioned as a masculine threat in terms of invasion, it was also rendered a feminine space for erotic possibilities and fantasies (Gerster 2009:311-12). The fear of “Yellow” domination would also gravitate towards the desire of Yellow Others. As Bhabha suggests, the East is constructed in a way that oscillates between desire and derision in contradictory formations.

More recently, this desire for a closer tie to Asia is related to economic opportunities that Asian countries may provide for Australia. However, mediating “closer ties” and allowing immigration from Asian countries does not necessarily mean that Anglo-Australians will accept Asian-Australians nor will it blur the lines between East and West, or White and non-White.

Ghassan Hage (2000:213-14) argues that Anglo-Australians fear an “Asianisation” of Australia as government policies seek stronger economic relations with neighbouring Asian countries. This is because it feels as though the government, who are mostly Anglo-Australian politicians, are seen to be neglecting “real” Australians by pandering to Asians through economic development and immigration policies. In this sense, the divide between West and East is prominent in Australia as the identification with Western societies hinders the possibility to remove Orientalism from who is and is not considered “truly” Australian; as in, West and *not* East, not Asian, not Oriental.

Australia appears as the last Western colonial vestige in a homogenised Asian region. As Ien Ang asserts (2000:116), Asianness is constructed under racial terms in Australia and in way that homogenises Asian identity. In this sense, due to physical signifiers, Asians in Australia will always be deemed “Other.” The representation of Asia, as an overall threat to Australia as a Western country in Asia, demonstrates the peculiar anxiety of East against West, and the “real” threat of an Asian invasion. This threat is exemplified through the physical presence of Asian people as they embody difference between East and West.

Considering ideas of fear and desire associated with the Oriental Other, the Mail-Order bride becomes a symbol in which these meanings are made real. She embodies what we know about where power lies within the relationship of East and West; as an Asian

woman she is powerless in her own country, that she is married to someone who has more opportunities by virtue of being born in a Western country. The geographical divide of East and West becomes a medium in which bodies are coded with ambivalent meanings of fear and desire.

The Role of Representation and Forms of Representation

Understanding the construction of East and West is integral to exploring how these ideas about people and place exist as both a macro symbol of inherent difference, according to geographical space, as well as how these grand narratives of what “we” do and what “they” do is ascribed to people as character traits. Navigating difference is an active exercise of determining how visual and embodied difference is marked upon the body. With consideration to Edward Said (1978), power is captured through these contradictory formations of desire and derision, in particular, power that Said identifies as political, intellectual, cultural and moral. Ideas about the Orient and the Occident bear material and symbolic significance in relation to Mail-Order Brides.

The representation of Mail-Order Brides will be examined in a way that isn't confined to the visual or textual, but in fact, informed by both. A more holistic approach to representation would be to understand representation as it functions within the context of Mail-Order Brides and the ideas that proliferate from this kind of representation. In a sense, what are the ideas circulating when Mail-Order Brides become the topic of conversation? And, is it possible to locate this within a nexus of power? A way to bring these intersections in a more tangible form is to understand the function of racial stereotyping through Orientalism, and how stereotypes communicate ideas about Mail-Order brides. The types of power I wish to explore here are power moral, and power cultural.

The bodies that “typically” belong to Orient and Occident is coded with meaning. Reflective of the process of Orientalism, this idea of unequal power distribution is projected onto human corporeality. It imbeds ideas of the Self and the Other within a web of pre-existing and pre-established identities. The representation of the Self and Other manifest in a myriad of forms. However, our interest between East and West can be examined through pre-existing and pre-establish forms of representation that can

succinctly convey ideas about people and groups of people. Power moral and power cultural become embedded within physical signifiers of difference. These physical signifiers begin to represent symbolically and operate strategically in relation to power moral and cultural.

According to Stuart Hall (1997:229), the representation of the “Other” is often through extreme binary oppositions that fix a preferred meaning onto the body. In the case of stereotypes of Asian women and Mail-Order Brides, the tropes such as victim/perpetrator, naïve/cunning, submissive/manipulative, familiar/exotic are used and are required to represent foreignness which makes sense to a Western audience that understands the Orient. Similarly, Edward Said (1978:58-59) claims that orientalist categorisations control an established view of the Orient which “vacillates between the West’s contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in – or fear of – novelty.” These contradictory and binary oppositions float upon the bodies of Asian women. While womanhood may be a familiar concept in the West, “Oriental” and “Third World” impose different reactions to orientalised bodies which incite the primacy of fear and desire.

The representations of Mail-Order Brides are informed by orientalist representations and racialised representations. These meanings are fixed upon the bodies of Asian women, and Mail-Order Brides. Physical characteristics stand in for innate personality and character traits, as well as presumed disposition in social classes. In Australia, Filipino women have been depicted as “meek, docile slaves, oriental beauties with shady pasts, passive and manipulable, but also grasping and predatory, using marriage to jump immigration queues” (Robinson 1996:54). In this representation, the meaning attributed to Filipino women, especially those married to (white) Australian men, describes these women as products of their Oriental background, steeped in poverty and ultimately lacking in any assertive powers by being traditionally Orientally, both “meek” and “docile”, but capable of threatening the Australian man. Mail-Order brides are represented as either passive victims or gold-digging opportunists. These ideas are projected onto the bodies of Filipino women in a way that determines their behaviour and characteristics.

The depiction of Filipino women as gold-digging opportunists is traced to the marriage between Rose Hancock and Lang Hancock. Before his death in 1992, Lang Hancock was

one of the richest men in Australia and controversially married his Filipino maid, Rose, shortly after his wife's death in 1983. Rose Hancock was thirty-nine years his junior, and was considered beautiful but flirtatious (to her detriment). She was accused of having affairs and entertaining the advances of men.

The perception of Rose Hancock as promiscuous is attached to her as being foreign, Filipino, and poor. Her beauty and body is weaponised as her romantic sincerity is denied. It is an impossible to consider Rose Hancock capable of having an honest relationship with her wealthy Anglo-Australian husband. It is the inscription of these unequal and stark binary oppositions of West and East that are coded into the relationships that implicate a sense of inauthentic romance.

Rose Hancock's exotic background makes her desirable as the Other, a body that works symbolically to represent a unique sexual encounter with the mysterious East. According to Bell Hooks (1992:24) the sexualised Other is depicted as the site in which the White male may be enticed by the allures of the Other in the way that enhances their pleasure and adds to their experience. As Hooks (1992:26) suggests, previous to the racism explicit in the ownership of sexualised Others, the contemporary understanding of inter-racial sexual desire is considered "more exciting, more intense, and more threatening." For the White male gaze, there is both danger and excitement when sexually encountering the Other. The term "Yellow Fever" is used to describe a person who sexually desires Asian people. Fever, as a sickness, is consumed by Whiteness as the racialisation and sexualisation for the desire of the Other is made to incite fear and titillation.

The language used to describe non-Western Others, especially women, finds itself located within the language of victimhood for it to be authentic or true in representation. Rose Hancock as a Filipino woman married to wealthy Australian man is an example of her existing as both victim and opportunist. For Rey Chow (1993:30), the non-Western native woman is posited between a correct, authentic image, or a false image, predicated in Westernisation. The native is often associated with the "oppressed, the marginalised, the wronged." The former Rose Hancock belonged to a wealthy, well-established Filipino family. This, however, was contradictory to her depiction as a poor, desperate Maid. She had to be portrayed as the poor woman who married the rich man because that is all she

is capable of being. Due to representations of Mail-Order brides and Asian women, Rose Hancock cannot exist outside of that binary construction of victim or opportunist; she is both or nothing at all. The class dynamic is also revealing as it assumes Asian women automatically belong to a lower class, ignoring intricate class systems that exist in different countries. Poverty is attributed to Asian women who marry Western men as the West is positioned as more economically wealthy than Asia.

Mail-Order brides exist within representations which encourage the perception of Asian women as merely passive victims or exotic, and threatening Others. As Stuart Hall (1997:24) suggests, meaning is not inherent in the world; it is constructed and produced. However, the representations of the Orient and Oriental bodies seem “truthful” because meaning is fixed in a way that reinforces its own powerlessness. Representation can fix meaning so firmly that these representations start to appear natural and inevitable (Stuart Hall in Harris 2003:5). Therefore, representation when it is attributed to groups of people and maintain static, often contradictory or binary descriptors, can morph into racial stereotypes.

Racialised Bodies/Racialised Sexualities

Race and racialisation is a process where identities, experiences, and bodies are politicised according to particular concepts and meanings in relation to power. Race dehumanises and objectifies racialised peoples. As a child of first generation Filipino immigrants to Australia, my experience of the sexualisation of Asian women and Filipino women happened in my late teens. As I went to a same-sex high school, I rarely encountered direct communication by men or strangers who read my body as hyper-feminised or sexualised. Although, I was often told by Filipino family friends that “Filipino women are beautiful” and I understood this as an affirmation for the pride of our ethnicity, rather than an iteration of a stereotype.

As I started to date and socialise at parties, clubs, or bars with friends, I began to notice the confidence in which men approached me and read me a sexually available because of my “Asianness” or Filipino identity. The ignorance in declaring “I think Asian women are beautiful” or “Is it true Asians have tight vaginas?” or “My last girlfriend was Asian” – I find frustrating at best, and dehumanising at its worst. I am reduced to my racial identifiers instead of being approached as a person. My White Australian friends of course

deal with vulgar words from men, but rarely on a racial level. While I might get greeted with “Konichiwa” or “Ni Hao” or even “ching chong” – my White female friends don’t equally receive a “Bonjour” or “Guten Tag” as their racial identifiers are considered too normative to question while I am Othered as well as racialised under homogenous Asian identifiers. I am first met as Oriental and Other before I am invited to talk about myself, if I am invited to be my “self” at all. In this sense, ethnic groups become subsumed under racialised identities.

The distinction between race and ethnicity may be better illuminated by Karla Holloway:

“Race is a simple, political distinction that can support stereotype and prejudice. Ethnicity, on the other hand, evolves through a complex association of linguistic, national, cultural, and historical identities that affirm all the shifting forces and hierarchies of modern life, but that is also continuously affirmed, created, embraced by those who are ethnic...It is an issue of agency.” (Holloway 1995:105-6).

While we may be able to distinguish between different ethnic groups, the racial category subsumes particular ethnic groups through easily typified characteristics and therefore exist and behave according to those characteristics and traits. Men have stopped me on the street by asking me whether I’m Filipino, and insist on having conversations with me simply because I’m Filipino. By being read as Asian and Filipino, people have felt to know my character and personality before even having a conversation with me; assuming that I must be good at math, or a good singer, or have strict tiger parents, or want to be a lawyer or doctor. These stereotypes are posed as statements instead of questions: “you must be good at math” instead of “do you like math?” or “all Filipinos are good singers” instead of “can you sing?” I automatically belong to a racial stereotype before I am seen as an ordinary person.

My body as racialised, Other, Asian, and Filipino communicate particular traits and characteristics to those who read the dominant meaning coded onto my body. My ethnicity is subsumed under an idea of “Asiannes” which presumes racialised meanings specific to Asian countries and cultures. This racialised coding works in a similar way for

Mail-Order brides. As previously mentioned, Asian-Australian relations incorporate the conflation of race and ethnicity to ideas of East and West. The homogenisation of Asians leads to the generalisation that in Asia, “women are still women and men are still on top” (Pettman 2000:151). Gendered attributes position Asian women as hyperfeminine as an innate racial trait.

This is what makes both orientalist and racialised representation endearing to the discourse surrounding the Mail-Order Bride; both forms of representation inform and uphold seemingly stable notions of Asian women and their identities because they are upheld by two similar but outwardly functioning systems of power. This is to say that Orientalism and racial ideologies inform one another, and in similar functions, fix meaning onto “Oriental” bodies.

The orientalist reading positions Mail-Order Brides as products of their Oriental cultures, subservient and docile women, enacting gendered roles typical to Asian countries. With the help of orientalist representation, racial meaning is imposed onto Asian bodies in such a way that appears historically relevant, if not obvious and natural. The characteristics of a typical Asian woman is no long a racial stereotype (even though it is), but rather reflective of the simple cultural differences between East and West. It becomes interesting, then, to consider why ideas associated with traditional gendered roles, domesticity and femininity are so easily ascribed to Mail-Order Brides, whereas Western women are positioned as modern, career-driven, assertive, and liberated. Asian women are placed outside of modernity while Western women are considered contemporary and versatile human beings. Because of this, it is believed that Western men seeking Asian partners do so because they are inherently more feminine than Western women. This stems from the idea that there is a gendered difference between Asian and Western women due to orientalist and racialised representations.

The racialised meanings that underpin the representation of Mail-Order Brides are imbued with negative connotations, impacting the perception of Asian women as exploited due to their marriages to Western men. These stereotypes are intertwined with power moral and power cultural in the way that they allude to inherent imbalance between East and West. Mail-Order marriages are often condemned because they appear to exploit vulnerable women from developing countries. This assumption is rooted in stereotypes

of the perceived inferiority of Asian women and the general dire deposition of developing nations in Asia. The idea that Asian women are considered more domestic and feminine is a factor that makes them appealing to Western men; that Asian women are *just like that* and Western women are no longer suitable partners since the advent of the Women's Liberation (So 2006:404-5). It is perceived cultural difference which suggests that women belonging to the Orient are generally raised with more gendered constraints, and are more likely to perform or enact traditional feminine gendered roles. All these negative perceptions of marriages between Asian women and Western men circulate in a way that revert to stereotypes of imbalance. It automatically assumes that Western men, in most, if not all cases possess more power. This in itself is a racial stereotype of the West related to Orientalism. Said's idea of power moral and power cultural highlight the way that the Orient has been constructed as fundamentally oppositional to the West. The effect of this differentiation is that bodies are stereotyped and racialised according to the geographical conflation of the Orient.

The Right to Representation

The underpinnings of representations of Asian women, especially in the context of Mail-Order Brides, is orientalist. The idea that Asian women are perceived as victims is rooted in stereotypes of Asian women. It is a perception which assumes that Asian women who enter relationships with White Western men do so under desperation. It strips women of their agency to reduce a myriad of decisions, important life decisions, on the grounds of global economic inequality. Whilst it is vital to understand the role of Whiteness and masculinity in how it has encouraged the appeal of Asian women, it should not do so at the expense of the choices of Asian women. Edward Said's power intellectual and political are useful in understanding the way in which particular views of Asian women and Mail-Order brides are authorised and legitimised through educational institutions, and how this impacts the everyday politics of women labelled Mail-Order brides.

Wanwadee Larsen (1989), in her book *Confessions of a Mail-Order Bride*, reveals her personal experiences as a Mail-Order bride, challenging dominant tropes of female subordination and subjugation. Contrary to the idea she was bought, her family paid a considerable sum to a marriage broker to correspond with suitable American men. Raised

in a middle-class Thai family, Larsen's memoirs are valuable as testimony to the way in which some women actively seek and choose Western partners. American presence and a long history of Thai and American bilateral relations influenced Larsen's favourable perceptions of American men. While a failed marriage prospect and the death of her brother played an integral role in her decision to marry abroad, her fascination with the American lifestyle stemmed from the presence of American soldiers, films, and magazines, shaping her understanding of what it would be like to marry an American man.

While her book received widespread criticism for not challenging the dominant stereotypes of Mail-Order marriages, it is important to consider the way in which she constructs and re-affirms her new Thai-American identity and the varying modes in which she understands and performs gender. The failure to address a non-Western feminist perspective on gendered relations, marriage and migration by Western feminist scholars is a way in which women from "Third-World" nations are implicated as ignorant of their own oppression. It is important to mention Larsen's book as it was, for a long time, the only personal account of Mail-Order marriages in the United States.

Scholars such as Dootsdeemalachanok Thongthiraj (2002), Christine So (2006), and Bonnie Zare & Lily Mendoza (2011), reiterate that Larsen's memoir fails to challenge dominant stereotypes of Mail-Order brides by depicting Asian women as passive and conforming to traditional gendered roles. As Said (1978:5) claims, the East was a career for Westerners and this intellectual aspect gave a legitimate view of the Orient for Western audiences. Western perspectives, and that also includes non-White Western intellectuals, continue to look at the Third-World woman as incapable of having choices or agency. The history of Western scholars looking at the Orient authorises a dominant, often homogenous view of Asian women as only submissive and hyperfeminine by enacting "traditional" gendered roles.

While the Orient and Occident have been established through unequal distributions of power, it is important to note that the key acknowledgement of difference is not necessarily demonstrative of relationship instability. It does, however, reveal the ways in which people in these relationships negotiate different gendered dynamics in a way that

does not necessitate control or power over someone else. Indeed, the idea that Larsen is unaware or typically submissive as an Oriental woman reveals the way in which women are denied their right to choose their marriage partners without the conflation of their relationship as exploitative. It is important to consider and discern how gendered practices and constructions are not universal. By positioning Asian women as ignorant of their own victimisation, negative stereotypes of docile Asian women are ironically reiterated by those attempting to aid them.

The depiction of Asian women, especially Filipino women, as Mail-Order brides who are exploited or victimised has been reiterated in prominent research within Australia. Philippine nationals took prominence in Robin Iredale's (1994) research *Patterns of Spouse/Fiance Sponsorship to Australia*. Iredale presents marriages between Filipino women and Anglo-Australian men as inherently exploitative, suggesting that men seek women only for sexual pleasure. As "bars and brothels were well established in Manila and Bangkok," the former presence of Australian troops in Vietnam and surrounding countries inadvertently introduced Asian women as sexually available (Iredale 1994:555). She follows this by arguing that "introduction agencies, mail order bride companies, pen-pal systems, bars and brothels served initially as the major means by which Australian men were introduced to Asian women, particularly in the Philippines" (Iredale 1994:556). Filipino women are considered sexually available and this makes them particularly appealing to Anglo-Australian men. The way that Iredale highlights that this was the "major means" by which men and women met supposes that their relationship is based on the sex, furthering the idea that these relationships are not reciprocal or sincere.

While Iredale looked at the patterns of spouse/fiancé sponsorship, she notes that from 1982-1993, the largest group for sponsorship visas were people from the United Kingdom and Ireland, followed by Vietnam and the Philippines (Iredale 1994:551). In this period 9,572 Filipino women arrived as either fiancées or spouses. It is interesting then, to consider why domestic violence was considered higher within the Philippines cohort instead of sponsors arriving from Europe. Her research appears less interested in the occurrence of domestic violence or abuse within the largest cohort, and instead focuses on Philippine and Thai nationals. Her research reiterates the notion that marriages

between Filipino women and Anglo-Australian men are exploitative, whilst paying little attention the role that serial sponsorship plays in the likelihood of domestic violence.

Mail-Order marriages have been tarnished as inherently violent due to the misunderstanding of the role serial sponsorship. The issue of spousal and fiancée sponsorship was the focus of Australian parliamentary research in 1992, which focused on the nature of fiancée and spousal visa sponsorship and the likelihood of violence for men who sponsored more than one woman over a few years (Commonwealth of Australia 1992). The Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (DIEA) refers to this issue as “serial sponsorship” where a person sponsors a potential marriage partner or spouse from a foreign nation, and on more than one instance, had abused previously a former or current partner. By stereotyping Filipino women as more likely to be abused by their partners and by negatively portraying these relationships, the reality of serial sponsorship is hidden. The occurrence of violence occurring within these relationships is often due to the fact that some of these men have had a history of violence against women. The issue, then, is gendered violence, instead of the portrayal that these “Mail-Order” relationships will automatically be violent due to assumed power imbalances.

The Importance of Representation: The Deaths of Filipino Women

It is revealing to look at the ways that intellectual power has influenced, legitimised, and authorised a particular perspective on Mail-Order brides and Mail-Order marriages. The issue with racial stereotypes as a form representation is that it achieves the tenants of racism; it dehumanises subjects and denies them their identity. The right to representation and to be represented fairly is not always afforded to Asian women who are perceived to be Mail-Order brides. The consequences of dehumanisation through racist and orientalist representation can result in the unfortunate deaths of those who are dehumanised, or even vilify their deaths.

Cleonicki Saroca (2006) examines the media representations of the homicides of Filipino women in Australia and attributes the aspect of victim-blaming to stereotypical representation of Filipino women. The two main tropes she investigates is the idea that Filipino women are “women in danger” or “dangerous women.” For example, the coverage of Gene Bongcondin’s homicide portrayed her as “exotic, predatory and promiscuous” who used her “beauty and sexuality to exploit an ‘innocent’ Australian

man” (Saroca 2006:5). This justified her death at the hands of her husband who was frustrated with her “typical” money hungry and promiscuous behaviour. Domestic violence as the precursor to Gene leaving her husband was rarely covered, but rather sympathy was emphasised for her husband’s predicament; that he was tricked by his bride. This is because Gene was also perceived as a woman who was in danger by poverty but was saved by her Australian husband. The racial stereotyping of Gene reiterates Homi Bhabha’s (1982) ambivalence towards Otherness. The recognition of difference splits the racial stereotype into multiple *and* contradictory beliefs about a person; it enunciates and subjectifies the racialised body (Bhabha 1982:32). In this imagining, “woman in danger” or “dangerous woman” exists within the orientalist view of desire and fear. Racial stereotypes and orientalist ambivalence plays an integral role in representations of Asian women.

In further research, Saroca (2013) highlights the importance of challenging stereotypes as they play a significant role in how Filipino women are perceived as Mail-Order brides and as women who are either deserving or undeserving of their lives in Australia. These representations shift the blame from the male perpetrators as the women are held accountable for their own deaths. By accounting for absent and silenced voices in media representations of Filipino victims of domestic violence, Saroca (2013) refers to the memories of friends and families of Nenita Westhof and Marylou Orton to provide a counter-perspective on their characters. Their voices were absent in the media, replaced by stereotypical depictions of these women as just Mail-Order brides. Whether or not these women are Mail-Order brides does not matter as much as why the label is used particularly when in Filipino women are concerned.

The term “Mail-Order bride” invokes a myriad of orientalist and racist stereotypes of Asian women, and unfortunately, vilifies their deaths by shifting the blame onto them due to the negative representation attached to them. Representations of Mail-Order brides is important to understand and to locate within a power relationship as the impacts of particular forms of representations can have devastating consequences for Filipino women who bear the brunt of the negative stereotyping.

This authorised view of Mail-Order brides and Filipino women then justify or shift the blame in the advent of homicide or domestic violence. The wider assumptions about

relationships between Asian women and Western men as violent are authorised through intellectual institutions, and this has real world implications in the everyday politics of women. Agency of women is important to highlight and value within these discussions of Mail-Order brides. By excluding their experiences and voices, these women are reduced to orientalist and racialised representation which misinterprets or misunderstands how they experience their lives.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the impact of Orientalism, and representations of Mail-Order brides. The divide between East and West has been constructed in a way that positions Mail-Order brides as the exotic Other, creating polarising stereotypes and depictions of Asian women, in particular, Filipino women. The representations of Mail-Order brides are contentious because they reflect both orientalist representation and racialised representation, implicating Mail-Order brides and Mail-Order marriages in a relationship to power that is colonial, as well as what Said considers power moral, cultural, intellectual and political. The importance of representation and including women's agency is vital in challenging the problematic and negative representations of Mail-Order brides. By doing so, we shift the inaccurate perceptions of Filipino women and humanise their experiences outside of being just a "Mail-Order bride."

In the next chapter, I will expand upon the core ideas of representation I have explored here and examine how Orientalism and racialised representation inform the way that Mail-Order brides are perceived through the virtual and the real. By focusing on theories of intimacy, I will demonstrate how the Mail-Order bride is implicated by notions of inauthenticity, and exploitation.

2. INAUTHENTIC ROMANCE: “BRIDES FOR SALE” AND NEGOTIATING INTIMACY

In the last chapter, I explored the representations of Mail-Order brides and the forms of power (political, moral, cultural, and intellectual) which intersect in regards to representation. In this chapter, I examine how representation influences the Mail-Order bride industry, and how it informs our perceptions of commodification, exploitation, and authenticity within “Mail-Order” relationships.

This chapter will begin by looking at ways to understand intimacy and how intimacy is mediated through virtual spaces. It will explore how men and women form relationships online and how they understand the boundaries of virtual intimacy. It examines how our dominant ideas about intimacy impact our perceptions about the authenticity of Mail-Order marriages. The Mail-Order bride industry, as it will be referred to here, exists as profit driven business specialising in match-making, online dating, and marriage-oriented correspondence; online romance and intimacy services providing mentoring, counselling or advice to bridge cultural differences between partners; and to advise on practical legal matters in terms of spousal visas and the costs of correspondence, with the purpose of connecting Western men with foreign women, in particular, Asian women.

The purpose of this chapter is to challenge the idea that women are sold on Mail-Order bride websites, and to determine how notions of (in)authentic intimacy impact perceptions of Mail-Order marriages. I look at the way in which intimacy and romance can be understood in relation to online correspondence, and how this impacts the perception of authenticity for relationships that are labelled “Mail-Order.” In this chapter, I demonstrate how Mail-Order relationships are perceived as inauthentic due to orientalist power imbalances and the way in which theories of intimacy, especially when coupled with the virtual intimacies, reinforce the inauthenticity of “Mail-Order” marriages.

Happy Wife, Happy Life: The Gendered and Racialised Depictions of Mail-Order Marriages

The Mail-Order bride industry plays an integral role in constituting unions as commodities and relationships as transactional. It is valuable to consider that while the

medium might adhere to profit driven goals, the way that people engage online is diverse and multidimensional. To clarify, when women are seeking partners online, it is believed that they are being coerced into marrying men – selling their bodies in exchange for “a better life” in some developed Western country. Likewise, men who utilise online platforms to find a potential partner are considered degenerate individuals who buy women as brides due to their own social ineptitude.

I suggest, however, that men and women do not buy brides or sell their bodies. It is the perception of commodification and commerce which contributes to the notion that relationships between Asian women and Western men are inauthentic. I argue that this is because many Mail-Order bride websites engage with orientalist and racialised forms of representation online which complicate authenticity due to the use of stereotypes that reinforce gendered and racialised imbalances of power. Furthermore, when couples meet online and communicate from geographically diverse locations, it is assumed that this relationship is inauthentic because it was formed online. The virtual realm is important to consider as it is assumed that these couples have met online, even though that may not be the case. It is the perception that is imperative to reflect upon as online interactions are generally met with scepticism.

The Mail-Order bride industry often uses stereotypes of Asian women and ideas of a more “traditional” marriage to appeal to men. Women are often seen as commodified and as commodities to be bought and sold due to online representations of Mail-Order brides. According to Emily Starr and Michele Adams (2016), the Mail-Order bride online is constructed around hegemonic Western masculine. The foreign woman is decontextualized, indeed, homogenised, to be positioned as the perfect counterpart to the Western man (Starr & Adams 2016:955). The foreign woman is the idealised feminine domestic goddess, untouched by feminism and women’s liberation. She appears to only want to serve her husband and her home.

Similarly, Roland B. Tolentino (1996:66) suggests that the Filipino Mail-Order bride embodies a particular kind of nostalgia for nuclear families and traditional gendered roles. In this sense, the Mail-Order bride does not seek to challenge gendered roles, but fulfil them; the Mail-Order bride allows Western men to satisfy their “colonial nostalgia” for saving Third World women from their woeful native men and dire poverty (Tolentino

1996:70). The foreign woman as the Mail-Order bride is commodified in a specific gendered and racialised manner. The Mail-Order bride industry imagines the foreign woman as the solution to the breakdown of traditional Western intimacies. Foreign women from developing nations are perceived as women who possess feminine characteristics ideal for marriage and home-making. By appealing to intimate anxieties, Mail-Order brides are presented to Western men as a solution to finding long-lasting relationships.

These websites encourage the view that by choosing a Mail-Order bride, one is able to find intimate security with a partner who enacts traditional gendered roles. This is consequential to the argument raised by Rey Chow (1993) in the previous chapter and how foreign women or Third World women are considered locked in time as marginalised and oppressed. This reveals how Western feminist perspectives can be limiting, particularly when “more feminist” means a rejection of traits deemed too feminine. This reinforces the idea that Asian women are unable to make informed decisions about their relationships with Western men because they are seemingly oblivious to the subjugation of their gendered roles. The way gender is enacted varies, and by positioning a lens which asserts a “liberated” Western perspective on the correct way femininity should be enacted, reinforces the back-wards perception of Third World women. In the domain of the Mail-Order bride industry, it is the perception that foreign women have more gendered constraints that make them more appealing in the Mail-Order bride industry. It is the Otherness of foreign women as Mail-Order brides which are utilised as a “selling” point, while simultaneously perpetuating the one-dimensional stereotypes of women explored in the previous chapter.

The focus on the online representations of Mail-Order brides is centred around stereotypes of Otherness. The foreign Mail-Order bride is packaged as the “domestic exotic” who embodies feminine traits which support and reinforce “hegemonic Western masculinity” (Starr & Adams 2016:963). The virtual gaze towards the Mail-Order bride is Western male oriented, often utilising stereotypes and tropes embedded in Orientalism and racialised representation (Ling 1999, Lee 2016, Zare & Mendoza 2011, Sciachitano 2000). It is the reinforcement of gendered and racialised stereotypes of Mail-Order brides

that become selling points which channel ideals of intimacy. The Mail-Order bride as the domestic exotic is the process of romanticising traditional gendered roles and patriarchal households; the way that Mail-Order brides are “packaged” toward a Western male gaze engages with a particular narrative of intimacy, one which adheres to traditional understandings of Western masculinity and femininity. The reinforcement of more authentic forms of intimacy have been shaped around the Mail-Order bride, and are simultaneously undermined by the same “Mail-Order” label. Conversely, I suggest that the scholarship also re-imagines women online as exploited, and reinforces the vulnerability and orientalist representations of Asian women by excluding their motives to engage with online platforms. By focusing on business interests which utilise orientalist, racialised, and gendered representations, Asian women are silenced in a way that reiterates that these women are forced to marry Western men due to desperation and poverty, or to simply cheat the citizenship process. I want to re-imagine the “Mail-Order” bride as an agent capable of negotiating a fluid identity, removed from seemingly fixed markers of difference.

As I have discussed, Homi Bhabha (1983) argues that the depiction of the Other often vacillates between “desire and derision.” These paradoxical identities make it so that whilst a victim, the Mail-Order bride is tied to her dire up-bringing and her Third World poverty. If a gold-digging con-artist, it is her innate scrupulous character which makes her a threat to her naïve Western husband. The Other is inscribed through economies of “pleasure and desire” and of “domination and power” (Bhabha 1983:19). Expanding on Bhabha’s ambivalence, I suggest it operates in two discernible ways in regard to intimacy. As I have argued, orientalist and racialised representations are reflected within the Mail-Order bride industry. However, I propose that ambivalence also manifests through dominant narratives of intimacy. On one hand, the Mail-Order bride will provide and perform the desired feminine traits to secure a life-long intimate relationship. On the other hand, the uneasy descriptors of her willingness to perform her role for a price, crosses the lines of acceptable and authentic intimacy.

By considering how difference works symbolically through paradoxical stereotypes and ideas, the Mail-Order bride is both a symbol and an invitation to examine our dominant

ideas about intimacy and how it operates with the Mail-Order bride industry. Ambivalence operates through contradictory ideas of inauthentic and authentic forms of intimacy. However, there is no one right way to be intimate. This is where it becomes important to clarify what I mean about correct intimacy. If couples have met online through Mail-Order bride websites and similar forms of correspondence, that relationship is inauthentic because it is formed online.

Simultaneously, Mail-Order bride websites encourage the idea that authentic intimacy is founded on traditional notions of gendered roles which includes a feminine wife and a nuclear family. Even if couples have not met online, relationships between Western men and Asian women exist within this gaze of inauthenticity due to orientalist and racialised forms of representation, as well as the popularity and controversy of Mail-Order bride websites which encourage these particular forms of representation.

In this way, I suggest that ambivalence is important to consider in the locus of intimate (in)authenticity, especially for relationships labelled “Mail-Order.” The lens in which we view relationships we label as “Mail-Order” is through inauthenticity. By refocusing that lens towards intimacy, I argue that our dominant narratives about correct forms of intimate relationships is the reason why we perceive these relationships as inauthentic. This is further supported by the distinctions we make about the virtual and the real. These factors inform one another and support each other in a way that reinforces the illegitimacy of relationships formed online, and those labelled “Mail-Order.”

Ambivalent Intimacies: (In)authentic Connections

As I have argued in chapter one, Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* provides the foundation for representations of Asian women, and how this power dynamic is applied to Mail-Order brides. We can see this presented on Mail-Order bride websites as Mail-Order brides are represented through orientalist and racialised representations which appear to complement traditional Western ideas of masculinity and femininity. This perpetuates the idea that Asian women belong in the past where rigid traditional roles of gender apply. Gendered roles, as they are (mis)understood from Western and non-Western perspectives, are negotiated irrespective of dominant representations that may appear on Mail-Order bride websites.

Whilst the Mail-Order bride industry utilises orientalist, racialised, and gendered representations of women, I argue that the way that men and women form intimate relationships is multidimensional. Online intimacies become interpreted through gendered and racialised perspectives, and this encourages the view that Mail-Order marriages are inherently exploitative due to the relationships dynamics which are promoted through these platforms. Online correspondence challenges dominant notions of intimacy as it uncovers our aspirational narratives of intimacy in terms of valid forms of economic exchange within relationships, and provides a lens in which to explore Mail-Order marriages as mutually developed intimacies formed online.

Relationships formed online are often considered illegitimate, especially when labelled “Mail-Order” because it is assumed that the relationship is not built on romantic love (Robinson 1996:54-56 in Saroca 2012:55). How we come to view pairings between Western men and Asian women, and how we understand marriages we perceive as “Mail-Order,” are commonly seen through the lens of exploitation and inauthenticity. Online intimacies are scrutinised because we separate the virtual and the real in a definitive manner. Intimacy formed through the Internet is considered less desirable because it lacks physical proximity; it cannot provide the kind of communication that only the body can actualise and it denies the practice of our socialised behaviours. If we consider how these functions, we can understand the ways in which the “authentic” and “inauthentic” notions of intimacy prevail and work toward delegitimising the experience of couples who meet online.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (2003), contemporary intimacy is characterised by its fallibility, inconsistency, and “unbound” connections with others. Bauman suggests that love today is “liquid” – it is not meant to last, rather, our connections to others are “tied loosely” to be able to constantly and consistently move onto the next connection, the next relationship. Furthermore, with our intimate ties already so loosely bound due to the uncertainty in this “liquid modern” world, our connections formed on the Internet only serve as a testament to the fickleness of our human bonds; they are simultaneously “more frequent” and yet “more shallow”; they are “more intense” yet “more brief” (Bauman 2003:62-63). It is the nature of the instability of our modern intimate relationships that we turn to platforms, such as Mail-Order bride websites, to make us feel secure about our

relationships. Simultaneously, it is also why we perceive Mail-Order marriages as inauthentic because they break the normative rules of forming intimate relationships by finding alternative virtual avenues to find success.

For Bauman (2003), our virtual connections allow us to be more connected, but it does not necessarily mean we are engaged with people we are communicating with. We may be communicating with the touch of a button, but it exists within parameters which are tinged with mediums only the virtual world can afford. While we may reply with, “LOL” (laughing out loud), we may not actually be laughing out loud. Whereas, in physical proximity, something humorous may cause us to laugh (or fake laugh) to be engaged or seem engaged. The concealment of one’s true feelings or intentions are made effortlessly. This is, perhaps, why we come to idea that our online interactions are not as sincere as our forms of communication in person. Our sociality in physical proximity is considered simpler as our ability to conceal our true sentiments is much more difficult, thus encouraging the notion that the “true self” is found in person.

Bauman (2003) considers that real authenticity not possible online. However, I argue that the divide between virtuality and reality is an arbitrary distinction which promotes a dominant view of what authentic relationship should be, rather than how they are. I suggest that, similar to Homi Bhabha’s ambivalence, the two vacillating paradoxes are not separate but intertwined, often dependent on the intent of the individual. By that, I mean relationships today often involve a combination of both virtual and real forms of communication to maintain intimacy and romance. By championing that there is such a thing as authentic and inauthentic intimacy, we deny the humanity of particular relationships on ideas about where we think power is held. By looking at particular ethnographies which focus on relationships formed online between Western men and Asian women, I would like to illuminate the ways in which intimacy is achieved and negotiated online and offline between individual couples.

Negotiating Intimacy: Online Courtship, and Authenticity

Cleonicki Saroca (2012) explores the ways intimacy is developed online between Filipino women and Australian men, and how they navigate their virtual and physical interactions. She looks at how couples negotiate an understanding of intimacy and authenticity online,

and then later in person. In the progression of these relationships, both parties were aware and cautious about online communication. For example, Saroca (2012:63) notes that the two women she interviewed, Regina and Ronda, judged the authenticity of suitors online on the basis of sounding like “a very good man” or whether the conversation was interesting instead of monotonous. For these two women, assessing whether a man was good and interesting meant that ideally, men chatting with them would not speak to them in a sexual manner. Saroca (2012) suggests that this aspect was particularly important to these women because of stereotype of Filipino women as sexually available and Western men as predatory. Distancing themselves from that stereotype helped in assessing the authenticity of potential online partners. For these women interacting with potential partners, wariness of Western men who wish to seek sexual partners was of no interest to them.

Vivian Zelizer (2005) considers intimacy as both knowledge received and attention provided between intimate relationships which are dependent on mutual trust. For Zelizer (2005:14-15), knowledge about a person includes “shared secrets, interpersonal rituals, bodily information, awareness of personal vulnerability, and shared memory of embarrassing situations”, whereas attention towards someone involves “terms of endearment, bodily services, private languages, emotional support, and correction of embarrassing defects.” This broad definition provides a starting point for navigating individual expectations of intimacy between partners. Generally, this is the kind of intimacy we consider private, inside, or domestic. When this personal intimacy is made public, it is often interrogated because we consider intimacy to be between close relationships. However, intimacy is possible to develop online when negotiated on the basis of the needs of the couple, and whether the couple has decided to be mutually exclusive.

For intimacies developed online, the trust that people form is intrinsic to a stable and long-lasting relationship which progresses to meeting in the “real world.” Assessing and authenticating the character of a person known only through virtual mediums is an avenue towards building an intimate relationship. Intimacy, as experienced and practiced, is diverse and contains varied meanings for different people. As such, intimacy is dependent

on mutual trust and care between partners, and this has implications for relationships that are deemed problematic simply because they are labelled “Mail-Order.”

By exploring Cleonicki Saroca’s (2012) research and interviews with Filipino-Australian couples, we can start to imagine forms of intimacies which are both private and public, close and distant, virtual and physical. Relationships formed online are mutually agreed upon and built over time. Saroca (2012:65) quotes her interviewee, Ronda;

“...everyday we spoke for three hours minimum, we get to know each other. We have been open with our deepest secrets.”

Here, sharing secrets and knowledge about one another is possible through the Internet. Sharing is not limited to physical proximity. Secrets remain secrets between partners because they belong to one another and no one else. I argue that Zygmunt Bauman’s (2003) concept of intimacy is limited because he does not consider the ways in which intimacy is developed online. If we adhere to Zelizer’s (2005) notion of mutual trust and shared experiences, intimacy is possible between partners online for the way that they negotiate time and commitment in spite of distance.

Similarly, Harry, Ronda’s husband, believes that the Internet is a useful medium rather than a hindrance in facilitating intimacy. The virtual, then, is not a barrier nor is it a mask. The virtual realm is a bridge for intimacy and proximity. Harry says:

“The web has been a godsend to us. It’s because it’s how we met and it’s also how we’ve been able to maintain our relationship and through that our relationship has grown quite amazingly.” (Saroca 2012:66)

While information may be public online through profile pages, the way that people seek out partners is selective and the knowledge and attention providing to their partners are private and personal. Intimacy is both frequent and shallow, both intense and brief; and this is because intimacy in practice has public expectations and individual expectations. It contains a set of rules which are negotiated and agreed upon and this will naturally vary between couples.

Mail-Order bride websites confront how we think of our own private intimacies because these intimacies are no longer “inside” but out there in the world. It is this divide between personal/public and virtual/real which troubles our own understanding of authentic

intimacy within relationships. The virtual realm is often associated with insincerity or shallow human connections. By using Saroca's ethnography, I have aimed to demonstrate that relationships today often utilise both online and offline interactions to facilitate intimacy, and that intimacy developed online is no less valid than intimacy formed in-person.

While I have looked at the way in which virtuality reinforces the inauthenticity of "Mail-Order" relationships, it is important to also focus on another related aspect which encourages the view that these relationships are exploitative. As I have mentioned, "Mail-Order" relationships are believed to exist within economic exchange and commodification because of the way that women have been "packaged" towards a Western male gaze. Our attention to marriages labelled as "Mail-Order" stems from our certain societal expectations of authentic and inauthentic ways to be intimate. The boundaries between economy and intimacy are demarcated thus. I suggest that this is because of the virtual dimension, and the overt monetary exchanges that exist on Mail-Order bride websites. Our dominant ideas of intimacy, as separate to economy, influence our perception of Mail-Order marriages as inauthentic. I suggest that intimacy and economy do not have clear distinct boundaries, but are intertwined, albeit hidden.

Can't Buy Me Love: Intimacy as Commodity

The idea that money and intimacy are contradictory generates "conflict, confusion, and corruption" (Zelizer 2005:27). Money and intimacy cause confusion because they are deemed incompatible, and this leads to the idea that these relationships are corrupted; they are wrong because they do not conceal the exchange of money within intimate relationships. Relationships labelled "Mail-Order" are perceived as fraudulent, even though intimate social relationships regularly coexist with monetary exchange. While we may acknowledge there is an imbalance in shared economies for couples, if money should be separated from intimacy it seems strange, then, to be sceptical of intimate couples who negotiate the boundaries of monetary aspects of their relationships between one another. That is to say, that many intimate relationships, irrespective of being "Mail-Order" or not, already exist within negotiations of economic exchanges. I suggest that moral implications, which are imposed upon the commodification of women in relation to

money, only reiterates the inauthenticity of relationships between Western men and Asian women on the basis of economic exchange.

As I suggested earlier, the idea of security and relationship satisfaction is promoted as a guarantee within Mail-Order marriages. Men and women trust that these websites or agencies can provide for them a particular trajectory or narrative for intimacy. The issue, perhaps, is that because it is assumed that economic exchange is overt, negotiated, and agreed upon forthrightly, these relationships formed online are deemed less authentic or sincere. Irrespective of whether or not couples do or do not negotiate monetary exchanges, it is assumed that Mail-Order marriages are always in congruence with money. This leads to the general understanding of Mail-Order brides as women who are sold and bought online, thereby silencing the motivations and intentions of women who do engage with online platforms. I want to challenge this conception of money and intimacy as separate and interrogate how it operates in conjunction with relationships deemed “Mail-Order.” In order to do so, I suggest that dominant narratives of heterosexual intimacy influence our perception of relationships deemed “Mail-Order” as inauthentic because money is considered the foundation of these intimate encounters.

Intimacy can be considered a series of narratives which guide our expectations of relationships. For Laura Berlant (1998:281), intimacy involves a shared story and an aspiration for a story about oneself and others. In this sense, intimacy is something as simple as having a relationship which has a present and future trajectory. Because of the future implications of intimacy, “people consent to trust their desire for “a life” to institutions of intimacy” (Berlant 1998:281) which appear to be able to provide a sense of stability, security, and satisfaction for the long term. If we are to consider marriage as an institution, that is, an agreed arrangement with consenting partners to the rules of their relationship, alongside the legal acknowledgements of the union, then marriage can be seen as a way that we legitimise our relationships. Marriage reaffirms the relationship between partners as well as to family, friends, and the law. Marriage as an institution relieves the insecurity of human relationships for a time. However, it cannot secure the life-long relationships that it appears to champion for couples. This is troubling for those who adhere to notions of a lasting romantic love. The need for romantic human

connection with security becomes, like many social anxieties, a thing to be advertised, sold, and bought in a way which satisfies one's fears.

I propose that our "common sense" narrative for intimacy, which tends to dominate contemporary understandings of romance is as follows: that two people meet - "love at first sight" - develop their relationship, marry, have children, buy a house, and grow old together. In this narrative, love is the foundation of the intimate relationship. Since "Mail-Order" relationships are seen to have developed due to money, it dilutes the legitimacy of the relationships. This is why relationships deemed "Mail-Order" are considered inauthentic, even exploitative. The purity that we ascribed to love is tainted with what we consider as consumable commodity.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (2003) our intimate desires are enacted through consumption. Bauman differentiates between desire and love as he argues that they are practiced and function in contradictory modes. Desire is consumption. It wishes to "imbibe, devour, ingest and digest – annihilate" (Bauman 2003:9). On the other hand, love is preservation. It cares and maintains the object of love; "The loving self expands through giving itself away to the loved object" (Bauman 2003:9). When the idea of finding love online is similar to buying a brand new pair of shoes on ASOS, the boundaries between (in)authentic intimacy is drawn at economic lines. You cannot give yourself away to the loved object when the loved object is a commodity. In this way, Bauman demonstrates our anxieties when confronted with relationships that seem to be connected to commodification and money. It does not contain the "purity" in which love exists separate to money. Nicole Constable's passage on the commodification of intimacy will better illuminate this dilemma:

"The commodification of intimacy refers to ways in which intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market; are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices; and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, echoing a global capitalist flow of goods" (Constable 2009:50).

If we are to consider the Mail-Order bride industry as an active entity in the commodification of women's intimacy, then we can begin to unpack why and how Mail-

Order brides are considered exploited and disadvantaged simply by engaging and joining websites to find romantic partners. The division between money and intimacy is often the line in which we consider relationships legitimate or illegitimate.

Bauman (2003) highlights our anxieties about intimacy which involves purchase. When intimacy is experienced through either desire or love, its authenticity and intention is made purely economic. It is assumed that real intimacy and interactions are made in person and are formed and performed through the body. The virtual development of communication and relationship formation shakes the dominant expectation for the growth of intimacy and “real” romance as the platform of courtship takes place before physical bodies ever meet. Coupled with the market perception of Mail-Order marriages, relationships formed online trouble what we consider an authentic and normative intimate connection. Bauman (2003:65) iterates that online intimacies are no different to shopping on a mail-order catalogue with no obligation to buy, and with a guarantee of return if dissatisfied. If you must pay for what you love, then it cannot be love. It must be desire for your wish is to possess, not protect.

As there is something particularly unsettling about online intimacies which seem to present contemporary relationships through material and economic symbols of romance, how we understand intimacy through virtual avenues is important for two reasons; it reveals our dominant narratives of authentic intimacy, romance and love; and demonstrates the ways in which power operates within global networks that uphold traditional notions of intimacy, as well as how contemporary virtual intimacies are represented. Mail-Order bride websites seek to stabilise the instability of intimacy by ensuring satisfaction. In this sense, by commodifying intimacy, by tapping into the need for human connection, these websites delve into our expectations and aspirations for intimacy.

Websites dedicated to Mail-Order marriages or correspondence marriage, in regards to Nicole Constable (see 2003, 2009), often involve forms of self commodification or representation which need to be considered outside of the market lens of buying and selling. Unlike Zygmunt Bauman’s criticism of online intimacies, Constable (2009) suggests that once we look at money, intimacy, and commodification through the

experiences of couples who have met online, then we are able to navigate the complex intersections of the power that inform perceptions of “Mail-Order” relationships.

This notion of the separation of money and intimacy is particularly troubling for Western men and Asian women in intimate relationships. With the stigmatisation of their relationships as inauthentic, couples interviewed by Cleonicki Saroca (2012) express how representations of their relationships, based on economic exchange, impact how their families and friends perceive the authenticity of the relationship. I aim to demonstrate that the separation of money and intimacy influence how others perceive “Mail-Order” relationships. This is reinforced through forms of orientalist and racialised forms of representation examined last chapter.

For Ronda, the prejudice came from unexpected people. Her husband, Harry, had a male Filipino friend who considered their relationship inauthentic because of the stereotypes of Filipino women. He had internalised these views about Filipino women and their intention to form relationships with Western men. Ronda says:

“I feel betrayed because what kind of Filipino is he... giving negative impressions about Filipinas...what you're after is just maybe the money or you want to get out of the country” (Ronda in Saroca 2012:74)

The betrayal that Ronda expresses may be due to the fact that as a Filipino man, Harry’s friend should be more sympathetic towards Filipino women. Instead, Harry’s friend believed in the stereotypes of Filipino women which depict them as gold-diggers and manipulative. Even to other Filipinos, relationships between Western men and Filipino women are considered inauthentic because of assumed monetary exchanges within the relationship. Irrespective of whether money is exchanged, it’s revealing to see that relationships between Western men and Asian women are considered economic. Being “after the money” assumes that the relationship is inauthentic because it is founded on money, instead of romantic love. However, it is actually impossible to gauge whether people are *truly* in love, as opposed to in love with the money. It is, as I suggest, the way in which we perceive these unions as inauthentic because it is “Mail-Order” and because of the power and wealth ascribed to Western men, and the desperation ascribed to Asian women.

Similarly, Siony and Barry's relationship was under scrutiny by Barry's workmates. Siony says:

'Barry told me "...it's basically because you are a Filipina"... [T]hey have impression that if you get a Filipina for a bride, it's for money because this Filipina wanted to have a good life...in Australia that's why she's going after you ...' (Siony in Saroca 2012:74)

The perception of intimate relationships between Western men and Asian women is through the lens of economic exchange through commodification. These online intimacies are commodified in a way that assumes the instability and inauthenticity of the relationship because of the perceived power dynamics as mentioned in the previous chapter. Wealth is overwhelmingly attributed to Western men, and Asian women exchange intimacy within these relationships. The way in which women are commodified through these websites, and iterated through orientalist and racialised representation, encourages the view of Asian women as objects to be bought and sold online. This, however, is not the case. But rather, an intersection of power and representation construct a dominant understanding of relationships deemed "Mail-Order" as inherently inauthentic and exploitative.

Conclusion

Intimacy, as I have explored, is complicated because it is both public and private; an enactment and performance of what we believe and experience as intimacy, as well as a restraint when benchmarked with more public, seemingly more legitimate enactments of intimate relationships. Our popular narratives of intimacy have yet to include diverse depictions of everyday relationships between Asian women and Western men, outside of the perception of "Mail-Order." I mentioned last chapter that Mail-Order bride is considered a derogatory descriptor, and as I have unpacked here, it rests on this notion of inauthenticity; inauthenticity that is informed by orientalist and racialised representations, currency and commodification, virtuality and grand narratives of intimacy. Relationships between Asian women and Western men are often seen through the lens of inauthenticity because of the Mail-Order bride label.

This chapter, I explored the ways in which (in)authenticity operates within relationships that are labelled "Mail-Order." By using intimacy as a lens, I expanded on how orientalist

and racialised representations are used within the Mail-Order bride industry, and how this unsettles dominant ideas of authentic intimacy in regards to money, commodification, and virtual relationships. I argued that relationships between Asian women and Western men are often seen through this lens of inauthenticity because they are labelled “Mail-Order” which undermines the intimate foundations on which relationships are “supposed” to be built on.

In the next chapter, I demonstrate how experience is vital in understanding the Mail-Order bride, and the ways in which agency and gender are navigated in an Australian context. I will specifically explore a case study to explore the experiences women have when they are labelled “Mail-Order brides.”

3. THE “MAIL-ORDER” EXPERIENCE:

WORK, AGENCY, AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

In the last chapter, I explored how dominant narratives of intimacy impact the perception of “Mail-Order” marriages as inauthentic. The perception of inauthenticity stems from the idea that online intimacies are fragile and insincere connections, and this, coinciding with how Mail-Order brides are presented as commodities online, supports the view that Asian women are exploited. However, I argued that online intimacies are multidimensional, and that intimacy is negotiated between couples. By examining how Orientalism intersects with theories of intimacy, I argued that inauthenticity is ascribed to relationships between Asian women and Western men due to the assumption that there are inequalities of power. By focusing on how couples use the Internet to facilitate intimate relationships, I demonstrated the way in which women are agents online, instead of passive commodities.

In this chapter, I want to focus on women’s agency and how this manifests within constraints of power. I have suggested that different forms of power intersect in regards to the Mail-Order bride. As I have argued, Asian women are often silenced through the “Mail-Order bride” label. By focusing on women’s experience, I aim to provide a counter-narrative for women who are labelled Mail-Order brides.

Borrowing from Judith Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity, I will argue that gendered identities are fluid and are useful in understanding the Mail-Order bride. I seek to challenge the ways in which Asian women have been represented as meek, servile, submissive, and more domestic and more feminine. As such, gender is a useful lens to examine why Asian women are seen to be victimised and exploited when labelled “Mail-Order brides.” Gender is important to explore as being a Mail-Order bride is a gendered experience. Gendering this experience allows us to consider the fluidity of gendered identities, and how women negotiate and navigate gender in varying contexts.

Using a case study, I will examine the ways in which gender intersects with other forms of power, and how women negotiate and navigate gender within an Australian context. I will specifically look at Mina Roces’s (2003) research *Sisterhood is Local*:

Filipino Women in Mount Isa. This case study is important to ground the contextual aspect of Filipino women in Australia, and how they have been stereotyped as Mail-Order brides. In addition, I will also include aspects of both Wanwadee Larsen's (1989) *Confessions of a Mail-Order bride*, and Michelle Rennex's (2017) *This is what life is like when people think you're a child of a Mail-Order Bride*.

“Me love you long time”: Problematizing Stereotypes of Asian Women

It is often believed that men seeking Asian brides are after young women who have little prospects in their country as they are poor and uneducated. As I have argued, Asian women are generally considered hyper-feminine and more traditional in their enactment of femininity. The multitudinous ways that gender is performed, enacted, and experienced is key to unravelling the erroneous links of the power that intersect in relation to the Mail-Order bride. As such, it is important to look at Wanwadee Larsen's memoir as she both embraces the Mail-Order bride label, whilst also rejecting the assumptions associated with being a Mail-Order bride. In this sense, her memoir is a focal point when exploring the experience of being labelled a “Mail-Order bride.”

Wanwadee Larsen's memoirs are a part of her narrative and her experience and it is the kind of agency Margaret Andersen (2006:393) considers the practice of actively and creatively giving meaning to experience. In terms of agency, it would be vital to understand agency as embedded within personal experiences and fields of power which may inhibit or allow outcomes (Gardiner 1995:13). In this sense, while Larsen narrates her experience, this experience is also embedded within a network of power. As such, Larsen remains aware of the way that people perceive her as a Mail-Order bride, and as a foreign woman. She goes on to say:

“As a woman and a foreigner, I like to think that I sit among these men and other women as an equal. I have been anticipating some overt signs of prejudice, but among these particular educated people there seems to be none” (1989:100).

She does not see herself as a victim or inferior or submissive, but in fact equal to other Americans. While perhaps, her class identification as a middle-class Thai woman signals an equal affinity to other middle-class Americans, the idea that as a Mail-Order bride she was poor and dependent on her husband challenges the dominant representation of

women as submissive within these relationships. In this sense, while she embraces the label of Mail-Order bride, she is cautious in how people will treat her as she knows what the label entails. Her memoir as a confession is vital because while she embraces “Mail-Order bride,” she equally seeks to challenge what it means to live the experience. As such, Larsen reveals the complexity of being ascribed the label and accepting it, but not without resistance.

I have argued that Filipino women are often stereotyped as Mail-Order brides, and this dimension allows an avenue for women to resist the constraint of this form of representation. The label Mail-Order bride is also a demarcation of power and women negotiate as to whether they embrace or reject the label while carving new identities for themselves. As I explored in chapter one, “Mail-Order bride” has negatively affected the lives of Filipino women. Because of this, I suggest that Filipino women in Mount Isa reject the label of Mail-Order bride through everyday forms of resistance.

Filipino women in Mount Isa navigate between different forms marginalisation. The mining town is relatively isolated, leading to locational disadvantages. Filipino women are considered women who are no strangers to poverty and dire circumstances, often because they are seen as Mail-Order brides (Roces 2003:81). Although Roces continues argue that many Filipino women in Mount Isa are university educated, and are Australian citizens, they are seen as Other because they have been read as foreign (Roces 2003:81). This is the climate in which these women are seen as being nothing other than simple brides.

“Just like I said, in reality, we may be Australian citizens, but when people look at us, they don’t Australians, do they? ...You know the saying goes like: to be considered half as good as men you have to be considered twice as good to be considered half as good. Well, it goes double than that again for us.” (Narelle in Roces 2003:81).

As I have argued, Homi Bhabha (1983) considers the Other a site of contention where ambivalent attitudes are ascribed to the body of the Other. While the Other is often characterised through polarising identities, it is the case that these identities are stabilised upon the body through the use of stereotypes. As such, I have argued that ambivalence functions through Orientalism, and is informed by racialisation. It is the facet by which

Asian women are perceived as both malicious yet innocent; cunning yet exploited. These paradoxical identity traits vacillate in a way that hides the possibility of agency – it is a constraint in which to move out of, to challenge, to resist. As Wanwadee Larsen traverses her identity as a Mail-Order bride, but not *just* a bride, similarly Filipino women in Mount Isa face similar constraints as their identities are scrutinised as they are women, *Other*, and Mail-Order brides.

The gendered and racialised traits attributed to Mail-Order brides, which I mentioned in the first and second chapter, did not consider the way in which women actually experience their relationships with Western men. I suggest that while women seeking Western partners is gendered, how women experience this phenomenon is as fluid as gender itself. According to Judith Butler (1999) gender is not a stable identity. Butler argues that:

“Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1999:179)

Gender is not a stable identity, but rather constituted through enactments in time and through time. The woman considered a Mail-Order bride is not who we assume she is simply because of the way she has been represented as a stable identity. This is why gender is important to discuss in relation to Mail-Order brides. While the notion of the Mail-Order bride has been popular in the last few decades, the imagery of the kind of woman has been somewhat unchanged. By considering identity as fluid and enacted by women, we can begin to explore the experience of a woman who is called a Mail-Order bride. For Asian women who are constrained by the way gendered and racialised forms of power are written upon their bodies, resistance demonstrates the fluidity of identity in such a way that may be considered liberating. This is important to remember as Asian women are often considered frozen in time, exemplifying traditional feminine gendered roles.

Resistance and Sisterhood: The Value of Work

When Filipino women in Mount Isa reject their label of “Mail-Order bride” they assert that their experiences and identities goes beyond the bind of stereotype and of gender. In this way, Mina Roces suggests that sisterhood becomes a vital source of support in an isolating mining town, especially in the case where women have married men who have more “patriarchal” values (Roces 2003:91). Instead of ceding to an inferior status, women in Mount Isa support one another to resist patriarchy, and in doing so, actively combat the title of victim by forming sisterhoods, and by stating their place through work and community participation (Roces 2003:92).

For example, Edith’s husband did not allow her to go outside of the house without him, even to socialise with friends. But with the support of her sisterhood, Edith’s husband relented and allowed her to leave the house without him (Roces 2003:91). Another woman Rosarita, looked after a Filipino woman who was fleeing from her abusive husband (Roces 2003:91). In this sense, while these women face constraints, through mutual support these women are able to help one another with everyday difficulties.

As a group, their active involvement in community events, such as fundraisers, performing traditional dances, and political endorsements, are their way of negotiating a space in a racist town (Roces 2003:93). Advocating for their rights, by backing interest political figures, suggests that these women assert their rights and their agency through their Filipino sisterhoods. The rejection their perceived helplessness is challenged by their relentless involvement with each other’s lives. As Roces (2003) argues, work and involvement in the community often help new marriage migrants find their place in a rural mining town. I suggest that community involvement and work is a form of resistance, as well as a way that women negotiate their new surroundings. Mail-Order brides are often depicted as passive victims, and by challenging this, I want to reveal how women resist this label by negotiating and changing the spaces that they inhabit to accommodate their lives, as well as their experiences.

Many Filipino women living in Mount Isa are university educated, but since their degrees and work experience is devalued in Australia, these women find themselves in what is traditionally considered as “feminine” roles (Roces 2003:82). These roles may include becoming housekeepers or cleaning ladies, chefs/cooks, and secretaries or performing

administrative duties; although there were a few women who worked in professional careers such as being a manager, researcher or an analyst (Roces 2003:82). Work as something that can be gendered is an aspect to explore, especially in this context. The notion of Asian women as hyperfeminine may be demonstrated through work, and the type of work that women are associated with is that of care-giving. In this way, by being in work considered feminine, the role seems to exemplify the tropes that Asian women are products of their oriental cultures. However, the role of women as brides *and* workers transcends what we assume a Mail-Order bride would do. To put simply, because Filipino women are stereotyped as gold-digging Mail-Order brides, the act of work defies the notion of monetary gain through marriages. Similarly, the notion that Mail-Order brides are generally uneducated means that if they work, it will only be menial roles.

Furthermore, the type of work does not matter much to women in Mount Isa as “long as it is honest work” (Roces 2003:86). For example, a woman named Tina is a chef, but was previously an accounting assistance in the Philippines. Another woman named Jessah has worked a multitude of jobs in Mount Isa, such as being a cleaner and a stock taker at Woolworths, but she has two bachelor degrees; Arts, Development and Education from the Philippines (Roces 2003:86). Women in Mount Isa often help one another find work. This combats loneliness and discrimination in the work place (Roces 2003:88). The component of work is important to value as it contends that notion that women merely stay at home, and it also allows women economic freedom and access.

In addition, women who do migrate for marriage often have varying attitudes towards work. According to Nicole Constable (2003) gendered understandings vary cross-culturally and by focusing upon experience, we move away from these gendered experiences as constraints or as simple inscription of the overall experience of Asian women. In Constable’s (2003:13) research, she expresses career-driven women in China are undecided about whether they would continue working overseas or become housewives after marriage. As she suggests, for some women it would depend on their husbands because not having to work is considered a luxury as they would be looked-after and provided-for well by (Constable 2003:13). In this sense, marriage and work are often intertwined when women negotiate their gendered identities.

Since there are little work opportunities in a mining town, Filipino women have had to find work in menial roles. As such, Filipino women migrating for marriage experience a situation where they negotiate their class status and work in the Philippines to be wives for Australian men who tend to be not be as well-educated or wealthy. This contradicts how Mail-Order brides are perceived to be poor and uneducated when they arrive as brides for men who are much more successful and much wealthier than they are. This appears to be an odd dilemma as one assumes that career-driven, class conscious, and educated women would have no interest in marrying miners in country Queensland. This may be due to their class standing, education, or age. By marrying overseas, they are able to fulfil their need of becoming wives and mothers (Roces 2003:87). In this sense, the representation of Mail-Order brides as poor, uneducated, and un-willing to work is misunderstood due to our misconceptions about Asian women, and the stereotypes surrounding their marriages to Western men.

According to Juliet Clark (2004) Filipino women who have migrated to Tasmania for marriage do so for social capital rather than economic capital. As Clark (2004:368) suggests, many of the women she interviewed married to “fulfil their status as a woman” because of a strong importance of marriage in Philippine society. Likewise, women in Mount Isa who have had a better economic status in the Philippines marry not for social mobility, but rather to fulfil a need for a gendered identity. As Butler (1999) suggests the enactment of gender is the way in which gender is constituted. For Filipino women, “womanhood” is very much tied into marital status. While the type of work may denote social status, some Filipino women choose to exchange this for the social status of “woman” as recognised in the Philippines.

The Gaze and the Experience

Mina Roces’s research as a case study is valuable as she positions women as both wives and workers, deeply engaged with one another and their communities. I have argued that Asian women, particularly Filipino women, are represented as Mail-Order brides. This leads to every day forms of resistance for women who experience discrimination because of the label. By exploring how women navigate these differing intersections of power, we focus on women as agents. I have suggested that the Mail-Order bride is reflective of orientalist and racialised forms of representation and power. In addition, gender impacts

how women are perceived and received within rural Australia (and Australia in general). Because of this, it is important to look at the ways in which resistance is both reflective of a rejection of the colonial stereotype and demonstrative of women as agents.

How we gaze upon the Mail-Order bride, that is, a woman whom we assume is a Mail-Order bride, is based on ideas we have about power and representation. When we focus on women as agents and explore their experiences, we understand that their identities expand beyond how we perceive them to be. By considering Michelle Rennex's (2017) reflections *This is what life is like when people think you're a child of a Mail-Order Bride*, we subvert this gaze and begin understand how this impacts Filipino women in the everyday. While I have demonstrated that Filipino women resist and challenge the label of Mail-Order bride, I want to further reiterate the importance of focusing on experience in uncovering or shedding our biases with Asian women.

Rennex (2017) was born to a Filipino mother and an Anglo-Australian father, she noticed the bias people directed towards her mother and herself as a mixed child. She recalls her childhood and writes about the way a woman in Lidcombe looked at her family. Rennex says:

“When you're the product of two people, one from a prosperous country and the other from a developing country, you're often labelled as different in the playground and beyond. If your mum is from the Philippines that label pretty much screams child of a loveless marriage.” (Rennex 2017: n.p)

From Rennex's memoirs, people assumed that her parents' relationship was inauthentic based on economy as well as stereotypes of Filipino women. Her experience as a child that is both Filipino and Australian exposed her to way people have interpreted her parents' union through visual signification. The perceived inauthenticity of relationships between Western men and Asian women operate through the skin via the gaze. As such, Orientalism as power imbalance between East and West, developed and developing, and this is ascribed onto the bodies of Asian women and Western men.

For Michelle Rennex, the awareness of the gaze directed towards her parents' union, especially towards her mother, was manifest from a young age. The meaning behind the

gaze she learnt much later through representations of Filipino women through visual media. The Filipino woman in Priscilla Queen of the Desert was “angry, crazed, attention-seeking, money-hungry, gold-digging” and Rose Hancock was merely a “former-pantyhose model” and a “bitch” (Rennex 2017: n.p). The representations she saw around her about Filipino women informed her of how strangers looked at her mother, and how they looked at her, a product of money instead of love. But considering Rennex’s final remarks:

“I’ve persevered through the taunts and sly digs about what it seemingly means to have a Filipino mother and Australian father, because I’ve seen things that the middle-aged, white woman on the street in Lidcombe hasn’t. And that’s a relationship sustained by a strong love. I’ve seen a lot. And now I can see that it’s time for everyone else to open their eyes, stop judging, and catch up.

The re-direction of the gaze through Michelle Rennex’s experience reveals our common misconceptions about relationships between Western men and Asian women. The intimate relationship between her parents’ is more than skin tone; it is the initial reaction we have to difference, to the discomfort of seeing this coupling. For Rennex, this passage demonstrates that her intimate relationship with her mother is shared through histories marked upon the body, seen and unseen. The way in which Filipino women have been depicted as Mail-Order brides is poor representation and a tired stereotype. As such, the redirection of the gaze, into one of experience, humanises the lives of Filipino women.

Conclusion

The association with Asian women as poor and uneducated stems from the assumption that non-Western countries and people from non-Western countries are steeped in poverty. In this sense, when Filipino women in Mt. Isa engage in work and work in the community, we start to see how women enforce their right to space, and that they are not merely the wives of men.

This chapter has looked at the experience of women labelled as “Mail-Order brides” with the use of Mina Roces’s (2003) research *Sisterhood is Local: Filipino Women in Mount Isa*. The purpose of this case study was to further investigate the agency of Asian women, especially women deemed Mail-Order brides. Through understanding how women experience, navigate, and negotiate gender, race, patriarchy, and their new surroundings,

I demonstrated that gender performativity is capable of pin-pointing the diverse stories and lives of Filipino women. By focusing on agency, I hoped to reinstate the status of women deemed “Mail-Order brides” and Other, as agents, not simply victims.

CONCLUSION

The “Mail-Order bride,” for the purpose of this research, has been examined as a symbol, as well as a human experience. By focusing on the experiences of women, my aim was to challenge the “Mail-Order bride” label, and how women negotiate their identities. As I have demonstrated, Mail-Order bride is a derogatory label, but it is a label which reflects a specific kind of representation reinforced by Orientalism. By tracing the idea that relationships between Western men and Asian women are built on exploitation, and an unequal distribution of power, I highlighted a reason why these pairings appear exploitative and inauthentic. As such, I have demonstrated that looking at the experiences of women challenge the dominant narrative of these relationships as inherently prone to violence.

In the first chapter, I examined the role Orientalism plays in the perception of relationships between Asian women and Western men as violent and exploitative. While I do acknowledge that domestic violence is an issue within the milieu of the Mail-Order bride discussion, I argued that a misunderstanding of serial sponsorship influenced the idea that Mail-Order marriages were more prone to violence in 1980s-1990s Australia. I argued that scholarship played a significant role in legitimising a particular view of Asian women, especially Filipino women, as victims of abuse when married to Western men. As such, my aim was to challenge this perception by unpacking the role Orientalism has had in legitimising the view of Asian women as docile, submissive, and weak. By looking at the way in which Asian women have been stereotyped and represented as Mail-Order brides, I traced the foundation in which people assume the inequality between Western men and Asian women by examining the role of Orientalism.

In chapter two, I elaborated on the notion that relationships deemed “Mail-Order” are inauthentic. By looking at theories of intimacy, I argued that Mail-Order marriages are considered inauthentic because they do not adhere to dominant narratives of intimacy. I argued that this is due to the perception that Mail-Order brides are sold and bought online, and this, in relation to orientalist and racialised representations of Mail-Order brides, reinforces the idea that relationships between Asian women and Western men are

inauthentic. I suggested that relationships built online are often negotiated between couples, and are multidimensional. As I argued, the online realm reinforces the notion that relationships between Asian women and Western men are inauthentic and insincere. By exploring how couples experience their relationships online, I argued against the idea that Asian women can be bought online as commodities for Western men. This is particularly important as the Mail-Order bride label encompasses exploitation on the basis that their relationships are built on monetary exchange, and not on romantic love. As I suggested, this reinforces the perception of Mail-Order brides as women who incapable of having authentic relationships with men.

In chapter three, I used a case study to demonstrate the importance of focusing on women's experience, especially when labelled as Mail-Order brides. I centred this exploration around the experiences of Filipino women in Australia. The purpose was to return to the central focus of this thesis, which was understand how representations of Mail-Order brides affect women in the everyday. I argued that Filipino women in Mount Isa negotiate and navigate their gendered experiences and use community, work, and sisterhood as a way to demonstrate that they are more than just brides. They are active within the community and use support networks to reject the title of Mail-Order bride. I suggested that work for these women operate in such a way which provided a counter-narrative to the perception of Mail-Order brides as dependent on their husbands for financial support. In turn, I also used Wanwadee Larsen's (1989) memoir *Confessions of a Mail-Order bride* to demonstrate how her experience alludes to the awareness of being labelled a Mail-Order bride, while also actively the rejection stereotypes of Asian women as docile. Larsen, instead, speaks about her gendered experience as contextual, and fluid as she negotiates her new life in the United States. In this sense, by focusing on the ways that Asian women voice their experiences, I showed the importance of looking at women as agents, instead of passive actors.

This thesis has examined the complexity of the Mail-Order bride by exploring power at its intersections, the dynamics of intimacy, and the diversity of experience. The purpose of this research was to illuminate the importance of focusing on women's experiences, especially when they have been silenced. In this way, my interest in Mail-Order brides

has been to traverse the space in-between ambivalence – not desire or derision – but the everyday negotiations that women make in the development of their identities. This research has offered a conceptual approach to the Mail-Order bride by identifying the way in which power and representation inform perceptions of Asian women. As such, it is the aim of this research to influence future researchers to consider the diversity and complexity of lived experience, alongside questions of power. When Asian women have been studied, but not always been given dignity or voice in representation, it is then for us to determine avenues in which the subaltern speaks; and for her to be heard.

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