Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia

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The love that the men have for their ladies is truly amazing. I love my wife and she is not a sex slave or my maid at all and there is a chance we may decide to live in the Philippines. Yes there are cases where there has been abuse or prostitution involved but this is rare. . . . One thing for sure I love my wife very much we only have a 15 year age difference and this makes it easier.


Much of the U.S. popular media (television, Internet, and print journalism) highlights sensational and erotic aspects of international correspondence marriages. It stresses, for example, the trafficking or victimization of women from impoverished regions of the world; men’s physically, sexually, or emotionally abusive acts; and the “buying” or “selling” of women. A significant body of scholarly literature also provides analysis and critique of so-called mail-order bride catalogues, marriages, and the wider profit-oriented international marriage industry.¹ Such literature often points to the historically constituted, military, colonial, and neo-colonial bases for racialized, sexualized, eroticized, and exoticized images of “Asian” women, and to the power imbalances between Western men and foreign women. It identifies important U.S. and Australian historical legacies of race and sexuality in relation to Asia, and in relation to Western fantasies about Asian women.

Most academic studies of so-called mail-order brides are based exclusively on textual and discursive readings of catalogues, not on ethnographic,
Internet, or face-to-face interactions with the men and women involved. As such, they focus largely on images, sexual stereotypes, and implicit or explicit erotic desires, overlooking the ways that women and men pursue, realize, and negotiate such relationships and their own discursive representations. Rarely do such studies consider the everyday experiences of such couples or the less erotic desires that motivate men to look for foreign wives, whom they believe will make better or more suitable partners than Western women.

Ara Wilson’s work is a notable exception to the overemphasis on eroticism in analyses of introduction catalogues. She has observed that “representations in the catalogues are not sensuously alluring or romantically enigmatic” (1988, 121); that women’s photographs often resemble yearbook or passport photographs (117); and that “when references to the erotic aspects of Asian women appear, they seem almost an afterthought” (121). However, much of the popular and scholarly literature on Asian mail-order brides can be faulted for inadvertently reproducing the facile images of erotic, exotic, victimized, essentialized, and homogenized Asian women that they aim to criticize, and for failing to consider the “stutterings . . . and silences surrounding erotics” referred to by Schein and Mankekar in the introduction to this volume.

The Western characterization of Asian women as erotic, exotic, and sexually available (often paired with the idea that they are poor and desperate) is widespread in scholarship on mail-order brides, and on the Internet. As Vernadette Gonzalez and Robyn Rodriguez argue, the Internet has reinforced the links of “Filipina to sex, mail-order bride, or domestic” (2003, 223). Whereas common stereotypes of Asian women’s subservience and sexual availability no doubt feed into Western desires and fantasies about Asian women, as is perhaps best exemplified in sex tourism, popular stereotypes of sexy and available Asian women do not easily or comfortably co-exist alongside other popular stereotypes of Asian women as ideal, faithful, loving, devoted, and desirable wives with old-fashioned, traditional family values (Constable 2003; Wilson 1988). Given popular conflations of maids, brides, and prostitutes, men who look for wives in the Philippines and other parts of Asia must contend with the potential tensions between real or imagined erotic desires and their desire to meet a “good” and “traditional” Asian wife. By defending their countererotic motives, they represent themselves online in marked contrast to Western sex tourists who openly brag online about their sexual exploits and erotic adventures (Bishop and Robinson 2002).
As the epigraph to this chapter demonstrates (originally posted as part of an Internet newsgroup discussion), men in search of Asian brides are often actively invested in distancing themselves from sex tourists and in discursively countering more explicitly erotic images of their foreign brides as sex slaves or prostitutes who are motivated by greed or opportunism, and who are viewed as morally questionable. This is not to say that stereotypes of Asian domesticity, innocence, and sexual purity are not or cannot be eroticized (Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Wilson 1988). Yet among the men I encountered from the United States, sexual experience and sexual availability were understood to pose a volatile threat to their less explicitly erotic desires for love, family values, fidelity, and lasting marriages. Ironically, these men’s countererotic objectives share something in common with those of Kristina Wong, a feminist web activist who has set up a “mock mail-order bride website” (http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com) to subvert and criticize the image of mail-order brides and the wider commodification of Asian women.

The images on Wong’s website are grotesque and carnivalesque depictions of Asian women that challenge and unsettle stereotypical images of sweet or sexy Asian femininity. Sections of the website are titled “Memoirs of an Anti-Geisha,” “Madame Bootiefly,” and “The Harem of Angst,” and the text and images highlight the ugly, the bizarre, and the absurd. Chris Hudson convincingly argues that Wong’s website is an example of cyber-feminist subversion: it “diminish[es] the authority of the orthodox narrative by intentionally de-eroticizing and de-essentializing Asian women” (Hudson 2007) and produces “oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval 2000).

The men described in this chapter clearly have a very different agenda than Wong and the contributors to her website. Their discursive styles differ radically from Wong’s and they can, of course, hardly be described as subversive cyber-feminists. Yet both actively participate in the politics of representation online and, perhaps surprisingly, share some of the same countererotic objectives. The men have created—and actively police—an online community that serves as an arena in which to deconstruct prevailing erotic stereotypes of mail-order brides. Their strategies clearly draw on and reproduce certain aspects of conventional stereotypes of Asian women that coincide with their notions of good wives, but they are nonetheless highly critical of erotic stereotypes and they actively promote countererotic self-definitions of the sorts of men and the sorts of women who seek to meet marriage partners through correspondence.

Elsewhere I have written about the online and offline community of U.S.
men, Filipinas, and Chinese women who seek foreign marriage partners (Constable 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). The Internet dimension of my wider research involved several different but overlapping translocal and multisited dimensions: research on and among Internet introduction agencies, Internet correspondence (as a researcher) with women who sought online partners, research in or around Internet cafés in China and the Philippines, research on private groups or listservs that I joined as a researcher-member, and research on public online news-discussion groups. Each Internet-related aspect of my research revealed different facets of a wider virtual network that includes men and women involved in intercultural relationships, as well as many other interested persons. As a participant of sorts in this wider virtual, discursive network, and as an “itinerant ethnographer” (Schein 2002, 231), I observed multiple ways boundaries between the local, national, and the global are challenged, resulting in a discursive community that at once “feels” local but is in fact highly global. This virtual network or imagined community of sorts has shaped and facilitated the circulation of transnational desires, revealing qualitative changes in the ways that cross-border marriages are imagined, realized, and argued about.

In this chapter, I limit my focus to Internet spaces that predominated in the 1990s and early 2000s and still exist today. Those more “static web pages and message forums” are retrospectively dubbed “Web 1.0,” in contrast to the newer, more interactive, more media-intensive “wikis, blogs, and embedded videos” of the post-2004 “Web 2.0” era, with its greater user interface (E. G. Coleman 2010, 489). Within such spaces, I consider how Western men debated, contested, and reproduced notions of erotics in relation to “Asian women.” I ask what the virtual communities of men and the electronic trails and texts they produced reveal about the erotics—or more accurately the countererotics—of correspondence marriages. Whereas sexuality and eroticism are common underlying themes and underlying sources of tension among men who seek foreign brides, countererotics refers to the ways men and the virtual communities to which they belong attempt to disavow and distance themselves from the erotic and from the vilified images of the “sorts of men” who are said to seek mail-order brides.

Sites of male participation in homosocial communities attempt to counter the explicitly eroticized and sensationalized images of mail-order marriages. These sites display mainly men’s voices. In these contexts, as on the Internet sites advertising brides and domestic workers examined by Gonzalez and Rodriguez (2003), women are generally spoken about but they are rarely active participants.
Imagined Virtual Communities

As observed in the introduction to this volume, monumental changes have taken place in the scale and reach of transnational media over the course of the past three decades (E. G. Coleman 2010). By the 1990s, the phenomenal growth in Internet media created massive opportunities for growth in the business of correspondence marriages. Pen pals and correspondence marriages are, of course, not new. European women who married men on the Western frontier of the United States during the nineteenth century, and Japanese and Korean “picture brides” who immigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century to marry Japanese and Korean immigrant men are cases in point. But there is something qualitatively different about how the Internet has turned correspondence into more than a method of introduction or a business and into a “community” of sorts, in a larger sense.

In his watershed study of the rise of nationalism, Benedict Anderson argued that print media played a key role in creating the imagined community of the nation among individuals who would never meet face-to-face and whose identities and interests otherwise varied greatly (1983). More recently Arjun Appadurai observed that the Internet serves as a resource to create new “imagined selves and imagined worlds” (1996, 3). He notes that these imaginaries are neither “purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined,” yet they have the potential to create “communities of sentiment” that are transnational and can “operate beyond the boundaries of the nation” (1996, 4, 8). The development of the Internet has allowed for the emergence of new types of imagined communities of sentiment, including new, transnational marriage-scapes and discursive networks or communities of men involved in or concerned about correspondence courtship and marriage. One major concern of these men—one shared sentiment—is how to respond to the prevailing negative views about those who engage in mail-order marriages.

The Internet serves as far more than just a tool for introduction and correspondence between individual men and women. Clusters of people who interact by way of the Internet constitute new sorts of global and virtual networks that overlap and intertwine with those that are more face-to-face, or more territorialized. Like global ethnoscapes, online virtual communities can be seen as networks or as “landscapes of group activity.” As such, they are “no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous” (Appadurai 1996, 48).

The Internet has spawned new opportunities for researchers. For ethnog-
raphers, it yields novel routes of entry into research sites and unique ways of combining online ethnography with more conventional research in the offline, so-called real world—facilitating new “ethnotextual” approaches (Mankekar and Schein, this volume). The Internet leaves behind textual trails and remnants that can be archived and excavated. It served as a key point of entry from which I conducted research among the online and offline community of U.S. men and Filipinas who sought marriage partners through correspondence. In the wider project I utilized the Internet to introduce myself as a researcher to women in China and the Philippines who sought foreign marriage partners. I then followed the pattern of many U.S.-Asian couples and met my pen pals face-to-face abroad. Through the women, men, and couples I met online and offline, I gained access to some of the more mundane and less-explored dimensions of correspondence courtship and marriage. Men and women introduced me to Internet spaces in which the meanings of correspondence relationships—in relation to erotics and wholesome family values—are debated, negotiated, renegotiated, and counteracted, or at least complicated in light of the more negative popular views of men as, for example, losers and control freaks who “buy” wives as maids and sex slaves, and the women as desperately willing to “sell themselves” or to accept the role of maid and sexual fantasy for the sake of emigrating. Internet spaces are thus ideal locations in which to examine “cultural struggles that suffuse texts, the politics of the popular and the public, and the everyday lives of men and women” (Mankekar and Schein, this volume).

**Introduction Agencies**

Through ever-expanding numbers of introduction websites and online catalogues, Internet websites fuel the desire and opportunity to meet an ideal mate in far-flung regions of the globe. They offer growing numbers of men and women from different regions new and wider opportunities to meet, correspond, and sometimes marry. Yet these opportunities are not egalitarian or free for all, but usually fit into a wider pattern of global hypergamy (Constable 2005a). Opportunities for men from wealthier regions of the West to meet women from many regions of the so-called Third World have increased and follow a particular gendered, cultural logic. The opportunities are clearly marked by what Doreen Massey calls “power geometries,” in which some people “initiate flows and movement, [whereas] others don’t” (1994, 149), and by what Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler call “gendered geographies of power” (2001, 6), pointing to the ways gender and social loca-
tion are tied to geographic mobility. Such patterns are also fueled by globally circulating images and fantasies of ideal marriage partners, particularly those in which Asian women are considered (as in Schein’s chapter) less corrupted by Westernization.

Since the 1980s, patterns of international correspondence courtship and marriage have broadened greatly in scope. Filipino-Australian marriages are among the best-known examples, but other recent marriage flows have included Filipinas who have married men from rural Japan and from northern and western Europe and North America, and women from China and Southeast Asia who have married men in Taiwan and South Korea. Although printed catalogues still circulate by postal service in the United States, the business of marriage introductions rapidly expanded in the 1990s with the rise of Internet-based agencies that more efficiently and discreetly introduced English-speaking men to women from Asia, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Latin America. Women listed on such Internet websites come from all parts of Asia, but as of the late 1990s most Asian women were from the Philippines.

There exist many different types of introduction services. On one extreme are those geared explicitly toward men and women who hope to meet “life partners” or “marriage partners,” whereas others are aimed at dating, escort, and sexual services. The latter explicitly offer sexual adventures and eroticism. By contrast, marriage-oriented services are very tame, yet like other profit-oriented online businesses, they share the goal of promoting certain fantasies. My research focused on “marriage-oriented” agencies or those aimed at heterosexual men from the United States who seek “life partners.” Many such agencies are listed on www.goodwife.com, a website that promotes itself as a “Mail Order Bride Warehouse,” with links to agencies that introduce North American men to foreign women. As of August 2000, I counted 350 international introduction services listed on goodwife.com, up from 202 in 1999 (Scholes 1999). Under the category “Asian,” the number had increased from fifty-five in May 1998 to eighty-nine in August 2000. The “Soviet” category had increased from 105 in May 1998 to 164 in August 2000. Goodwife.com did not include many free pen pal clubs, nor did it include individually run personal websites that offer introductions at no cost, thus 350 agencies is a conservative estimate (Constable 2005b).

I examined numerous online agencies, including kiss.com, Oceanbridge, and China Bride. Listings were available to anyone who logged on to the site. Most allowed nonmembers access to photographs of women (and sometimes of men) and to women’s autobiographical statements. This material
typically included a woman’s name, age, occupation, education, religion, height and weight, marital status, and a few comments about her interests or hobbies. Given that much of the existing research on mail-order brides stresses sexual stereotypes and Western fantasies about Asian women, I was surprised to see that the vast majority of the visual images and bodily poses of Filipinas and Chinese women at the time were very modest and that the women’s own statements were remarkably nonsuggestive.6

The website for Asian Brides Online is fairly typical of marriage-oriented websites that advertise listings of women from all parts of Asia. Its home page announces:

Don’t settle for anything less! If you’re looking for a lifetime companion, a best friend and faithful lover, you’ve come to the right place! Don’t get distracted by other “Romance” companies. Choose the Premier international introduction and tour company! Asian Brides Online! We are dedicated to introducing foreign women to loving, stable men who desire wives! You’ve seen the rest—now choose the best! . . .

We have selected over 20,000 beautiful, sincere women, from all walks of life, as potential mates for our male clients. We have more than 70,000 photos, and add new applicants weekly. We invite you to browse through our online catalog at the variety of ladies that have at least one thing in common—they want husbands! (http://www.asianbridesonline.com, accessed October 20, 2006)

Noteworthy about this website and many others that aim to introduce U.S. men to Asian (and other foreign) women is their apparent lack of explicit eroticism. Although at the time of this research the website included a few photographs of women’s faces that appeared to be overtly provocative or flirtatious, and although clearly pretty women had been chosen for the home page, most women were nonetheless strikingly demure and the photographs were more reminiscent of passport or yearbook photographs than of more seductive images of women in popular media. The text, moreover, was fairly typical in its emphasis on lifetime companions, faithful women, and sincerity. Many similar marriage-oriented websites—unlike those that are aimed purely at dating, escort services, or sexual services—seem to at once promote an image of Asian women as faithful and sincere, and yet to explicitly or implicitly contrast them to other types of women. On the Asian Brides Online website, the potential “distraction” from “Romance companies” alludes to the possibility of encountering the “wrong sort of woman.” This wrong sort of woman is never far from the surface of discussions of foreign brides. The source of her corruption is usually left implicit (as in this
case), but in other cases is explicitly linked to her Westernization, her loss of “traditional values,” her greed, or her loss of sexual innocence.

The general statements on the introduction-agency websites I examined were rarely sexually explicit. They often harped on overall beauty or physical attractiveness and the ideal wifely qualities of foreign women, often contrasting them to assertive and spoiled Western feminists and gold diggers. The erotic appeal of such women is typically left implicit—or in the eye of the beholder. One exception was on websites that focused specifically on Filipinas. Some such sites noted the cultural importance of virginity before marriage in the Philippines. These discourses may be referred to as countererotic, even as they may suggest erotic subtexts, as in the allure of the virginal.

**Private Listservs**

Online catalogues are not something entirely new. In many ways they are an updated version of older print catalogues via a new media technology. Yet the Internet allows for much easier access to introductions between prospective spouses, and it also offers new ways for men and women to correspond more quickly and efficiently than through the older method of letters and postal services. Listservs and newsgroups, which offer truly new forms of sociality and new venues for circulating, perpetuating, and also challenging and debating assumptions about “Asian women” and “Western men” who partake in such processes of introduction and courtship, have received far less scholarly attention than matchmaking or introduction agencies.

In striking contrast to earlier decades, since the 1990s the Internet has allowed for the formation of men’s online discussion groups that can be seen as virtual communities of sorts. These groups are often private listservs and chat groups for members only. Members apply to join, are vetted by moderators, and can be rejected or later banned or prohibited from participating in the group if they break the rules. The discussions and the texts that such listservs produce are thus usually circulated to a delineated group of members. Their members share many of the same views about correspondence courtship and marriage, and they circulate such positive or corrective views internally, in many cases “preaching to the choir,” defending the community boundaries, and openly criticizing negative depictions of their relationships and defending their marital motives. Although the views expressed on listservs are limited in circulation, the perspectives expressed are still significant, and they often cross numerous spatial and social divides.

With good reason, men from the United States are often highly wary
and critical of negative, sensational, and titillating media portrayals of mail-order marriages. As a result, many refuse to speak to researchers or journalists and advise their wives or fiancées to do the same. Most couples prefer to live their lives in private, not under the critical eye of those who portray them as social rejects who have failed in the marriage market in the United States, as a result of physical or emotional shortcomings. They resist serving as fodder to fuel media images of men who are said to “buy” beautiful Asian women to fulfill their sexual fantasies and double as a maid and wife, or portrayals of young, beautiful, and sexy foreign women who are cast as either naive and innocent victims or as immoral predators who are out to seduce gullible men for the sake of money or a green card.

Given the difficulty of identifying and meeting couples in the United States, I depended partly on personal networks. Ben, a law professor who met his Filipina fiancée through correspondence, introduced me to other Filipino-American couples, told me about others, and described Filipino-American Family (FAF), the Internet list to which he belonged. He urged me to join FAF, which at the time (1999) had over four hundred members—mostly men who were engaged, married, or intended to become involved with Filipinas. Some men had met their partners in the United States, or while traveling abroad, but most had met or carried out much of their courtship through correspondence. Although most had met their partners through introduction agencies (and willingly recommended those they considered reputable), members of this Internet group saw themselves as an extended family and a close-knit community. This online support group of sorts shared advice and information about agencies and the process of getting to know someone at a distance, but their common tie revolved around their experiences with Filipino partners, and the trials and tribulations of the process of immigration to the United States. Concerned about the stigma associated with mail-order marriages, they did not define themselves in terms of how they met their partners, but on the basis of being part of an intercultural couple. Their self-definitions were clearly intended to contrast with and to diffuse externally imposed notions of mail-order brides and marriages.

The members and moderators of FAF, like the other marriage-oriented lists I joined over the next two years, made a point of policing, censuring, criticizing, and occasionally censoring or excommunicating the occasional men who joined the list and expressed “inappropriate” viewpoints or blatant sexual fantasies about “Asian women,” or those who did not seem sincere in their desire to find a marriage partner. The moderator of one list, for ex-
ample, directed me to a website he described as “the worst” pen pal business on the Internet. He and other members of the list—perhaps partly for my benefit—expressed shock and outrage that Filipinas were represented in such highly sexualized and objectified terms, and were even more appalled to learn that the owner of the site was a U.S.-based Filipina. Several months later, the same moderator banned a member because he discovered a link to “sex tours” on the man’s private web page. Another man was banned because he came across as too much of a “control freak” in relation to his fiancée. Men sometimes also used the list as a place to meet, question, and carefully scrutinize the motives of prospective suitors for women in the Philippines who were friends, townmates, or relatives of their own girlfriend or wife. Men offered other men advice on finding women from small towns, and on how to avoid or identify women who had lived or worked near military bases, lest such women have lax morals or be hiding a history of sex work. In a variety of ways, Internet groups oppose and actively counteract negative constructions of the “sorts of men” and the “sorts of women” who seek partners through correspondence.

In the Philippines in 1999, I witnessed firsthand how men who belonged to Faf and other groups maintained contact. I observed as Ben and his friend Ted, one of the moderators of Faf who was visiting his fiancée as well, talked for hours about couples they had read about and whose photographs they had seen on Faf, and about the importance and value of this community. Ted regularly logged on to Faf from his Manila hotel room, and Ben made a point of visiting an Internet café each day to sift through the messages that had accumulated in the last twenty-four hours. Messages included those sent by men who were visiting pen pals and fiancées abroad. They shared success stories (“she has her visa, we’ll be home next week!”), frustrations (“the INS turned down the visa”), requests for last-minute advice (“where do we get the police clearance?”), and suggestions (“the cheapest calling card is . . .”). Couples belonging to Faf whose visits overlapped made a point of getting together. These men provided each other with reassurance about the “honorable” and “marriage oriented” purposes of such visits, since couples quickly became aware that the vast majority of visible interracial couples in Manila (mainly white men and Filipinas) had met, or were commonly assumed to have met, through sex tourism and the sex-entertainment industry. Some men avoided patronizing bars and nightclubs that were associated with sex tourism (especially with a girlfriend, wife, or fiancée), thereby attempting to distance themselves from what they considered more singularly and overtly commodified sexual relationships. Couples
belonging to FaF distinguished themselves from other types of couples in other ways as well. Some slept in separate hotel rooms, others were accompanied by women’s family members and friends who served as chaperones, and some simply vowed that they were “saving themselves” for after marriage. Others slept together but justified it on the basis of their proclaimed steadfast marital commitment.

When I met them in Manila, Ben and Ted spoke at length about FaF, and Ben encouraged me to join. I read all the public, unrestricted material on the FaF web pages. This included detailed information about visas, the immigration process, immigration interviews, agencies, Manila hotels, and even a public chat, or bulletin board, on which nonmembers could post questions and answers. The site included two private lists for members only. The main list included mostly men (and a few women who had Filipino husbands or fiancés), and the second was explicitly for “women only,” and its members included Filipina partners of men from the wider list. I wrote to the moderators of both lists, explaining who I was, the nature of my research, and submitted a request to join. I mentioned Ben and Ted’s names, suggesting that they might vouch for me, if necessary. I never received a response from the women’s list, but a few hours after submitting my message to the FaF “men’s” list, I received a message from one of the moderators allowing me to join.8 The moderators suggested that I lurk briefly then introduce myself. They did not want to be accused of admitting a researcher without the members’ knowledge. The moderators warned me that some members had had “bad experiences,” and that I might be flamed.

For less than two days I “lurked” (or observed) as the list members exchanged over a hundred messages a day. Then I introduced myself. Within just a few hours, a number of members responded, and I became the latest hot topic. There were three main responses to my presence: friendly, challenging, and hostile. Most were friendly at first. Members welcomed me as they do all new members and encouraged me to participate. Some expressed enthusiasm and said they hoped I would help to represent the lesser-known “positive” side of the picture and help to set the record straight about them and their relationships. These were by far the most common responses to my introduction.

Some responses were more challenging but not hostile. Members explicitly called on me to explain and defend my research goals and methods. Two men cited their own research in a university hospital and asked why I was studying their group. They asked what I hoped to “prove.” They asked about my credentials and research design, why I chose a qualitative
approach, whether I had obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study of human subjects, and whether I had read the latest Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) report on the topic.\textsuperscript{9} Defending my research to these educated locals was more of a challenge than any defense or peer-review process I have experienced. From their perspective, allowing me to simply “observe” and design my research in response to what I learned was not reassuring. They wanted to know exactly what I was looking for and how it would be used.

When I checked my e-mail a few hours later, there were many more messages, including several that were far more hostile. These came from four members, two of whom were especially angry. One compared my presence on the list to having a stranger enter his home who listens to his private conversations and makes him feel defensive. The moderators, he said, had betrayed “the family”—a popular metaphor for this exclusive online community. They had allowed a stranger who, by virtue of being a Western, woman researcher, was assumed to be hostile or unsympathetic to their relationships, to enter their safe domain. One man objected to being treated like a “lab rat,” regardless of my reassurances. These four critics said that they would not participate in any discussions while I was there, and they warned others of the danger of a researcher who would observe their interactions, twist their words, and use whatever they said against them. Others accused the critics of paranoia, asking what they had to hide, noting possible positive outcomes of such research, and noting that researchers might already be on the list but not have been so honest as to say so. Several pointed out that I was not an “unknown stranger,” since Ben and Ted had met me in person. Others debated whether the information on the list was in fact “public” and whether my assurances to “do everything possible to protect their identity” (use pseudonyms, avoid identifiers, and acquire permission to quote them) were enough. My use of the phrase “everything possible,” one man wrote, gave him greater cause for concern than anything said thus far. Members debated whether there was anything “bad” or “harmful” on the list that could be used against them. One man who argued that there was “nothing bad” and that the list had nothing to hide was harshly chastised for his naiveté. How could he not know, the critic wrote, that anything could be used out of context to make them look bad? Ted responded that he had met me and that ultimately it came down to trust. He recommended that others read my book about Filipina domestic workers and judge me on that basis. Another wrote that the moderators had decided to trust me, and I should therefore be given a chance.
The four outspoken critics advocated strict boundary maintenance in their community and remained adamantly opposed to my presence. They intensified their attempts to protect their “family” from the threat I posed as an outsider, a researcher, and a Western woman. Two sent me private messages demanding that I leave. Finally, I announced my decision to unsubscribe. For the better part of forty-eight hours my research and I had become the main topic of discussion and hundreds of e-mail messages on the topic were exchanged. As I explained in my final message, I respected the position of those who preferred not to be studied. I had never knowingly forced myself on research subjects before and had no intention to do so now. I did not want it to come down to “either she goes or I go.” According to men on the list, the topic dominated the discussion long after and created some sharp divisions and conflicts among members of this community.

After I sent my final message, I received hundreds of e-mail messages from men who said they were sorry I had left. Many said that they understood and respected my decision, and that I “had no choice.” Many expressed shame or regret that I had been so bitterly flamed by a vocal minority. Others thought I did the right thing, but apologized for the flaming. Many offered to help with my research, and about thirty men sent me brief narratives that described their experiences meeting, courting, and marrying Filipinas. Many of these men became founding members of the U.S.-Filipino Group (UFG), an offshoot of FaF with about forty members in late 2000. Daniel, the moderator of the UFG, started that list with the explicit purpose of helping me with my research. By 2001 the UFG had grown to include over two hundred members, with several active women members, including fiancées in the Philippines, Filipina wives, and Filipinas who were involved with U.S. pen pals. The critical opinions about my presence demonstrate the importance of verbal exchange in the policing and maintenance of community boundaries. My leaving (or expulsion from) the group, as well as the various shifts in membership and the development of new offshoot groups, illustrates the fluid and shifting nature of these communities and the key role of discourse in their making and unmaking.

A Countererotic Narrative

Whereas those who opposed my presence on FaF aimed to protect their community and their reputations, fearing bad press from a researcher, those who welcomed me were likely motivated by the view that I could help to promote more positive views of their motives and their relationships. In contrast to FaF, the members of the UFG explicitly welcomed my presence.
Although posts to the list were varied, many men showed little hesitation about sharing their stories. Bruce lurked for several months then posted his story. I cite Bruce at length below to convey what is a fairly typical tone. His experience is unique yet also familiar, in that it tells a “love story” that resists the more stereotypical narrative of exploitation or eroticized and exoticized mail-order brides:

Hello List,
My name is Bruce and I have been a member of the list from the beginning. It has been a long time since I posted my introduction and I never got around to telling my story. Actually, back in March there wasn’t much of a story to tell, but many things have changed since then. . . . Well, to give a little background about me, I am 33 years old and I have never been married. I have corresponded with Filippinas for eight years, taken three trips to the Philippines, and I have been engaged twice (once to an American and once to a Filipina). Now, after so many years of searching, I can finally say that I have met the lady of my dreams. Actually, meeting her took me completely by surprise, but it didn’t keep me from recognizing that she is the one. Here is how it happened. Last summer (1999), I decided that I was over my last relationship and it was time to move on. . . . Well, I began acquiring addresses from a couple different correspondence clubs and I mailed many letters. By October, I was planning a three-week trip to the Philippines for April 2000. My plan was to make some new friends, hopefully meet someone special, and then continue to correspond after returning home. I was going to visit one pen pal in Hong Kong, two in Manila, one in Cebu, and one in Butuan City. Well, my first two pen pals were very attractive and very sweet, but there was no chemistry. Then, six days into my trip, I met my Jasmine. Maybe it’s foolish to speak of love at first sight, but I don’t know how else to describe the way I felt when I met her. There was something in her eyes that captured me from the start and I just couldn’t get enough. We spent the next several hours talking and I couldn’t believe my ears. The more I learned about her, the more convinced I was that she is the lady that I have always been looking for. I even told her that first night that I didn’t feel the need to meet anyone else after meeting her. Unfortunately, there was a problem. [She] is the oldest in her family and she had made a commitment to support her three younger brothers through college. She had just returned from working in Singapore for two years, and she already had a job lined up in Hong Kong. Her intent was to work there for four years until her youngest brother finished school. Her mind was set to sacrifice her happiness for as long as it took to help her brothers, and it was obvious that marriage didn’t fit into her plans. Well, over the next few days that we spent together, there was definitely a chem-
istry between us and I became more and more optimistic about establishing a relationship with her. My biggest obstacle was to convince her that she didn’t have to choose between me and her family. If she wanted to marry me and come to the United States, I would be more than happy to help her to support her brothers. On our last day together, I told her that I loved her and I begged her not to go to Hong Kong. I do believe that she was tempted, but she had been “left at the pier” once before and she wasn’t prepared to change all of her plans based on the few days that we spent together. Of course I was disappointed, but I completely understood. I even gained more respect for her because of her independence and her determination. Before I left the Philippines, I made her two promises. I promised to visit her in Hong Kong sometime in October and, more importantly, I promised to wait two years for her if she needed to finish her contract. The next few months were at the same time very happy and very lonely. I could not have imagined how much our love would grow during our time of separation. We wrote letters, we talked on the phone, and we emailed at every opportunity as we completely opened up to each other. Then, finally, on October 21, I flew to Hong Kong and proposed to her. We only had two days together, but they were two of the happiest days of my life. I’ll only be happier when Jasmine and I are married so that we never have to be separated again. [She] is not happy in Hong Kong, but she wants to stay there while we process her papers. Understandably, she does not want to break her contract and return to the Philippines without any income while we wait for her fiance visa to be approved. In the beginning of our relationship, she said that she would be ready to get married after finishing her two-year contract. After about one month in Hong Kong, she said that she might break her contract in one year. Now that we are engaged, she is ready to start the paperwork now so that she can join me here as soon as possible. For those of you who are still with me, I have a question. I have heard that the U.S. consulate will not process her papers unless she has been in Hong Kong for at least one year. Does anyone know if this true? I have read at the INS website that it is totally at the discretion of the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong whether or not to process her papers since she is not from Hong Kong. I wonder if there is any way to find out in advance if they would be willing to do so. Well, I appreciate those of you who took the time to read my long story. I have more to write, but I’ll save it until later. —BRUCE

Bruce’s Internet posting tells a seemingly simple story. Beneath the surface, however, the story complicates and resists the more simplistic and exoticizing representations of correspondence courtship and marriage, highlighting instead the mundane, the practical, and the everyday. This narrative of encounter is not devoid of fantasy and desire, but the mode in which it is
conveyed is intentionally (and typically) spoken of as love and chemistry, in strikingly pragmatic and not explicitly erotic terms.

**Newsgroups and Chats**

Internet newsgroups and chats stand in contrast to the listserv community of men described above. Chats and newsgroups allow for a wider array of discordant voices and perspectives and a vocal critique of the inequalities and power imbalances of transnational marriage-scapes. I originally learned about “Pinay Brides—Internet’s Hottest Commodities,” an Internet news article on the “trafficking” of Filipinas, from the members of the UFG.11 Online responses to the article on the ABS-CBN News website, from men and a few women in the United States and the Philippines, point to several common themes in the competing narratives about marriages between U.S. men and Asian women. Responses echoed popular media and antitrafficking images depicting mail-order brides as passive victims of the global economy who are forced to “sell themselves” to foreign men. They also pointed to the image depicted in the media (and by men whose relationships have failed) of women as active aggressors who marry Western men for green cards and material advantages. Situated in relation to both these images were the less well-known, antierotic counternarratives of family values and respectability that are told by U.S. men involved in correspondence relationships. Notably absent from the online responses to the news article were the voices of women who might be labeled mail-order brides but rarely define themselves as such.

“Pinay Brides” was published on a Philippine-based news website called ABS-CBN News, one of the many online sources that the UFG list members scan daily for news relating to China or the Philippines. The ABS-CBN News article described the activities of an introduction agency run by William McKnight, an American from Montana, and his Filipina wife, who was said to provide “foreigners with the chance to ‘purchase’ their own Filipina bride on the net.” The article described how McKnight’s agency managed to introduce prospective spouses under the guise of a travel agency, despite the illegality of mail-order brides in the Philippines. Since Republic Act 6955 was passed in 1990, it has been illegal to advertise in the Philippines for prospective brides for foreigners, but employees of the agency apparently visited department stores and approached “sales ladies” in person to ask if they were interested in marrying Americans.12

One member of the UFG was especially interested in the article for what it said about unsuspecting U.S. men who were taken advantage of by ruthless
agencies and deceitful young women. The article described Lilian, a Filipina whose sister worked for the agency, and James, a U.S. man who had come to meet her in the Philippines, had fallen in love with her, and had “married” her in a ceremony sponsored by the agency. James returned home to begin the procedure to apply for Lilian’s U.S. visa. He also sent her a great deal of money by way of the agency, and then later learned that she had married another man. It became clear that Lilian’s and James’s marriage had never been official; the marriage had been “staged” and the agency had never filed the paperwork. After James returned to the United States, Lilian was convinced by her sister to marry another man through the agency. After describing James’s pursuit of justice through the Philippine Center on Transnational Crime, the article ends as follows: “The typical Filipina mail order bride believes that marrying a foreigner is her ticket out of poverty. But it may also lead to a descending hell of spousal abuse or white slavery. Yet still the march goes on—of young Filipinas eager to sell body and soul for a way out of the country. As one Filipina succinctly says, better to be a foreigner’s whore than a pauper’s wife” (June 9, 2000).

The article received resounding response from Filipino and American readers in the United States and the Philippines, including responses from members of FaF and the uFg. In the four days following its publication, abs-cbn News received more than two hundred readers’ comments posted on its website. The responses were largely, but not entirely, from men. They represented an immense spectrum of positions, some of which I shall briefly describe. Although my characterization risks simplifying complex positions and their internal contradictions, three broad responses to the article can be characterized as coming from critics of neocolonialism, unabashed liberal pragmatists, and good old boys from the United States. My objective is to indicate how these three positions—each of which might be seen as reflecting “imagined selves and imagined worlds” (Appadurai 1996, 8)—contribute to a wider global and transnational discourse on the erotics and countererotics of correspondence marriages.

The first and most immediate response that reverberated for five days was that of the seemingly nationalistic critics of neocolonialism, most of whom seemed to be, based on their names, Filipino men. These messages were highly critical of the existence of such introduction agencies as that described in the article, appalled by the shameful existence of “MOBSt” (mail-order brides) and of the foreign men who took advantage of Filipinas, and of the U.S.-Philippine history of colonialism and postcolonialism that has perpetuated Philippine economic dependency and government corruption.
The first angry cry urged calling on “the lovebug wizard” of computer virus fame to destroy the Internet site of the agency for the shame this caused the Philippines. Another message replied that the lovebug wizard was “not the real answer” but that the problem went far deeper. Some declared this “an embarrassment . . . nothing more than indirect prostitution.” Another labeled it “another sad part of Philippine history.” Several messages, including one by “bay agmo,” berated the men who patronize these agencies, describing them as “losers, degenerates, dom, perverts in their own country” (June 10, 2000). Such comments clearly highlighted the erotic and exploitative aspects of these relationships.

The responses then moved in several directions, those of the American men who defended themselves, and the liberal pragmatists like Visuck Lat, who explicitly turned the blame away from the agencies and the women and into the realm of the state: “It is not the Internet business [that is] to blame but the roots of the poverty, i.e., the government. If RP has a better and well managed govt., I don’t think human export will become its major commodities in today’s world market. I feel sorry for those who married their foreign husband as a ticket from poverty, but they may be so smart and very practical in life. Issues like this (the headline) surfaces when a relationship failed and legal issues are attached” (June 10, 2000).

Visuck Lat’s pragmatic defense of the women who take this “route out of poverty” was a theme repeated many times. “Combat Doc,” was a Filipino-expatriate doctor who, in the course of his various messages, identified himself as a naturalized U.S. citizen who drives a Mercedes and is married to a white woman (thus laying himself wide open to a flood of criticisms from Filipino “compatriots back home” who attacked his patriotism at a distance). He wrote that these women were “smart and courageous enough to recognize an opportunity and take it” (June 13, 2000) and that they are only doing what is best for them and their families. If the Phil. Govt was not as useless and corrupt as it is, our women would not feel any need to go abroad to work or marry. It is the govt’s ineffectiveness and uselessness in providing for its own people that are driving its citizens to go elsewhere. These websites are great for providing a conduit for these smart and intelligent women to find a better future elsewhere. Their children will be US citizens with rights and opportunities that many can just dream about. They will have access to the best education. . . . They will drive their own cars in HS. . . . These children will have high paying jobs. . . . These children will have a govt that cares about them. (June 11, 2000)
Likewise, Pierre Tierra, another commenter, writes,

Given a choice, a Filipina would rather be with her family in the Philippines if the family’s financial situation permits it. But because 95% of Filipino homes are in a desperate financial situation, the eldest child in the family (this can sometimes be a female) is forced to look for employment overseas as an OCW [Overseas Contract Worker] just to support their family. . . . Don’t blame the “Internet Filipina Brides.” Blame the corrupt officials for not putting the Philippine financial house in order. Dante wrote . . . that “the hottest spot in Hell is reserved for those who did not lift a finger to help their fellow men.” . . . The Bible assures us that the prostitutes, the abandoned, society’s “throw-aways” etc. will enter the Kingdom of Heaven first. . . . Dante Alighieri has already written where the souls of the corrupt and damned public officials will end up. (June 10, 2000)

Representing the “good old boys” from the United States and defending his and other Americans’ marriages to Filipinas, Nathan Watts (who is quoted in the epigraph to this chapter) wrote the first, and one of the best-received, of all the U.S. men’s responses. As a member of several lists for U.S. men married or engaged to Filipinas, and as someone who had met his wife through correspondence (because he thought U.S. women lack the “traditional family values” of Asian women), he criticized the article and many of the responses for not recognizing the sincerity of many men and women and their relationships:

I have to agree that there are cases where the ladies are abused or treated as sex objects only. I am an American married to a Filipina. I do not smoke or use liquor of any kind nor do I use drugs. But my interest has never put me in situations where I could meet ladies here in the states. So I joined a penpal club. I wrote a letter to my wife’s sister and she gave my letter to her sister who I married. I asked my wife the other day what [was] the biggest surprise she had when she met me. Her answer was that I was kind to her and her family. I belong to 3 groups that deal with immigration from the Philippines and between all groups membership is about 700 members. The love that the men have for their ladies is truly amazing. I love my wife and she is not a sex slave or my maid at all and there is a chance we may decide to live in the Philippines. Yes there are cases where there has been abuse or prostitution involved but this is rare. There are also cases where the ladies take advantage of their husbands. . . . One thing for sure I love my wife very much we only have a 15 year age difference and this makes it easier. When we married I agreed to assist her family and this is no problem in my book because I married a very special lady. I have a friend who had been married to his filipina
wife for over 27 years and he is also an American. But there will always be a few bad ones in every group. (June 10, 2000)

Many Filipinos commenting on the website applauded Watts’s message. Visuck Lat wrote, “Your point is well taken and I admire you for your understanding and support to your extended family. May God bless you and your family. I’ll go take on the day” (June 10, 2000). Pilosopo Tasyo responded, “Nathan Watts, you could be one of the gentle ‘dolphins’ [as opposed to sharks] I refer to above. Thank you so much for your kindness. In greater measure, may you and people like you be rewarded with continued joy, grace, and peace” (June 10, 2000). Likewise, Frank Navarro commented, “Very well said. Good natured people like you will always be successful. Go on brother” (June 11, 2000).

Yet despite the warm and conciliatory responses to Watts’s message, hostility toward U.S. men reemerged in several other messages. When the commenter Randy Townley took it upon himself to defend William McKnight and the agency described in the article, a commenter identified as Red Dev replied, “Oh give me a break!!! Give it up! You know what you are and what you do! These men aren’t looking for virtuous women, they’re men who can’t cut it with American women, or are looking for a poor soul who would be under their control to use in anyway they want. It’s because of their misfortune that this man is making an ‘honest’ living, isn’t it? If he really wanted to help, he wouldn’t charge a fee, don’t you think? You can hide behind words all you want, but you’re nothing but whoremongers and Pimps!!!” (June 10, 2000). Townley apologized for his avid defense of McKnight. After further inquiry, he learned that he was “incorrect.” Red Dev’s reply coolly advised Townley of the wisdom of doing his homework next time, “before making grand denouncements” (June 10, 2000).

In response to bay agmo’s statement that the foreign men who marry Filipinas are “losers, degenerates, dom, perverts in their own country,” Two Otap, an American married to a Filipina, wrote, “Pinoys have a reputation as being drunkards, 2 timing, dead beat scumbags who do not deserve to be with a Filipina. Think about that before you call western men whom go to the RP to marry a Filipina loosers etc.” (June 11, 2000). Surprisingly, the discussion did not escalate into further insults. A presumably Filipina commenter identified as Kalidad Sanchez wrote, “I agree! If Filipino men could take better care of their women then she would not be in every part of the world working as a domestic to some other family. It is not the Philippine government we should change—it’s our whole mind set. . . . Time for a
What is happening is just a sign of the times. Filipina women are waking up. . . . If we do not take better care of them they will certainly go [to] those they perceive will” (June 13, 2000). Bay agmo added, “It is interesting that many of the males are decades older than the female. . . . There might be a few success stories but I’m still not buying it” (June 14, 2000). Several other men whose names I recognized from lists emphasized and elaborated on Watts’s points, adding their own narratives or a Christian dimension to their marital commitment.

After five days, messages repeated the same patterns: U.S. men criticized the term and the notion of “mail-order brides” and defended their position on the basis of having experienced their own relationships as sincere and loving and based on “traditional” and “old fashioned” family values. Filipino critics such as “Apocalypse” bemoaned the shame and embarrassment of mail-order brides and asserted, “Filipinos should not allow anyone to market them as brides. It is better to die of hunger than to be a commodity exposed for wolves to devour. There is our dignity and self respect. Who will respect us if we practice these embarrassing acts?” (June 11, 2000). Others put them in their place. Kalidad Sanchez wrote: “Oh grow up! Embarrassing?? Not to want to marry and slave for some good for nothing husband? For loving and marrying and bearing children? Our mothers made the same choices. Perhaps you should ask them if they have any regrets. Are we racist or what?!” (June 13, 2000). Many continued to question the source of the problem, poverty, government corruption, or global inequality, and to discover the underlying truth. Visuck Lat ended on a more philosophical and conciliatory note, asking, “Those Amboys are losers? Those girls are opportunist? Or We’re jealous? . . . In my opinion it’s their lives and let’s not intervene in their personal matters whether they are losers, opportunist[s] or really in love, its their life, it’s their choice and I assumed they are all mature enough to make such decisions. We’re only human anyway and obviously nothing is perfect in this world” (June 13, 2000).

The views encapsulated in the Internet news forum pointed to many powerful critiques of neocolonialism and postcolonialism. They echoed critiques found in the popular media and among antitrafficking organizations of passive mail-order brides and women who are said to be “trafficked” by men and introduction agencies, and of women who would (supposedly) do anything for the material benefits marriage to a foreigner would afford her. Yet such stark and all-encompassing representations of women as agents or victims often do not mesh with women’s own experiences. The news forum reflects the views of U.S. men who resist the characterization of their mar-
riages as trafficking and their wives as bought or sold. It also portrays the voices of Filipinos who decry the shame of such an industry or of “their” women “prostituting” themselves to foreign men. What we did not hear were the voices of women who might be labeled mail-order brides.

In the online news discussion, women were spoken of by husbands, fathers, and compatriots. They were defended and criticized, and they became the ground on which a broader discourse on gender, nationalism, and colonialism is played out, discussed, or argued (Chatterjee 1993; Gonzalez and Rodriguez 2003; Mani 1987; Mohanty 1991). Women who are involved in transnational marriages, who might understandably be loath to identify themselves as mail-order brides are absent from the discussion. Perhaps this is because few women identify themselves as mail-order brides, but rather as women, daughters, immigrants, or wives of Filipinos or foreign men. As Kalidad Sanchez and Combat Doc suggested, Filipinas must contend with marriages in the Philippines or abroad and make decisions based on their own and their families’ best interests. This they do within the context of ever more readily available (yet nonetheless structurally constrained) global options and opportunities. Regardless of possible material gains or improvements they hope to gain for themselves or their family members, they reject sterile market analogies and views of themselves as commodities embodying simplistic stereotypes. It is not surprising, therefore, that except in cases where their marriages have failed or in the most blatant cases of abuse, women do not identify themselves as—or with—the notion of “mail-order brides” or women who are “trafficked.”

Conclusion

A key challenge in my wider research has been to allow for the possibility that correspondence marriages are and can be understood as something other than a sensational caricature of themselves. If the research goal is to provide deeper, richer, and more thorough understandings of the varied and complex meanings of such relationships, then it is necessary to resist the temptation to reduce them to a few fundamental—though admittedly important—racial, sexual, and erotic tendencies. The fact that marriages have both sexual and economic dimensions, that sex workers sometimes marry clients or have relationships that are not purely sexual and economic, and that both prostitutes and mail-order brides are assumed to be essentially poor and desperate, help to explain men’s urgent countererotic defensive-ness. The hostile, defensive, and unfriendly responses sometimes expressed by men online are linked to their desire to distance their marital choices...
from eroticized images that highlight the blurred line between marriage and prostitution. The men I encountered in this research often denied, sidestepped, ignored, or censored the political, racial, and sexual implications of their relationships. Yet all marital relationships, not just those based on international correspondence, involve sex and money, and all take place within particular historically gendered contexts of power.

One challenge is to understand and acknowledge the historical and social contexts in which erotic desire is produced, but also to understand the value of not reducing all correspondence relationships (and the men and women involved in them) to a boiled-down ideological essence of eroticism and racial and gender inequality. Widespread tendencies to highlight the erotic and sensational dimensions of correspondence relationships, and countererotic tendencies to deny or evade such stereotypes, risk overlooking what I would argue are significant and less sensational experiences and expressions of marital sentiment, migratory desire, and global imagining.

Internet technology has allowed for the emergence of a widespread, global, discursive network linking men from the United States and elsewhere who seek foreign brides, Filipinas (and women of other nationalities) who are open to the possibility of marrying men abroad, and many others—including anthropologists. Asian women participate by sending their names to online agencies and corresponding with foreign men. Men from the United States form Internet lists to provide a sense of community and support as they navigate the process of correspondence courtship and marriage. They respond collectively—as a defensive discursive community of shared sentiment—to oppose critical erotic representations of their relationships. They disavow or sidestep the issue of racial and gender inequality and produce alternative countererotic narratives and discourses about their marriages. These Internet discourses emphasize love, commitment, morality, and oppose the sexual aspects of stereotypes and images of Asian women.

As we have seen, Filipinos in the Philippines and the United States contribute a critical dimension to the discourse on mail-order brides. Cumulatively, the voices on the Internet make up a global, discursive network of sorts—not one that is homogenous, unchanging, or unified, or one that is egalitarian or devoid of privilege or exclusions, but one in which perspectives and viewpoints are aired, and in which different identities and subjectivities linked to class, race, nationality, and gender are articulated, inscribed and reinscribed, and imagined and reimagined.

The Internet often serves to reinforce and stabilize conventional stereotypes of Asian women and of relationships between Asian women and
Western men, as in the case of Western men’s sex-tourist blogs (Bishop and Robinson 2002). But the Internet also offers opportunities for new and unique forms of sociality and for spaces in which erotics and countererotics of desire are actively contested and debated. Kristina Wong’s cyber-feminist mock mail-order bride website is one striking example (Hudson 2007). In an online context, “Asian brides” may be billed as one of “the Internet’s hottest commodities,” but such media texts are also adapted, appropriated, reconfigured, and rejected as they travel between Asia and other parts of the online and offline world. Online communities and networks of Western men who seek foreign marriage partners through correspondence have created new arenas for expressing oppositional countererotic definitions of mail-order marriages. Although these men largely draw from one side of the well-known stereotype of “Asian woman” as good wife or prostitute, they nonetheless make use of the Internet to create an oppositional space from which to actively promote and circulate countererotic images of Asian women. These images stand in striking opposition to many prevailing eroticized stereotypes of the sorts of men and women who enter into correspondence marriages.

Notes

Although my analysis has a markedly different focus, this chapter includes some primary material that was previously published by the University of California Press in Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography and “Mail Order” Marriages (2003). My thanks to Joseph S. Alter, Ding Naifei, and Greg Downey for very helpful suggestions; Teri Silvio for an inspiring conference on “Asian Digital Cultures” at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan, July 28–29, 2005; and Louisa Schein and Purnima Mankekar for encouraging me to explore the discourses of countererotics and for their many helpful comments.

1. “Asian” women are of course a heterogeneous group, as are “Western” men, but stereotypes commonly homogenize, overgeneralize, and blur such categories. For discursive analyses of mail-order brides and catalogues, see, for example, the work of Angeles and Sunanta (2007), Constable (2003), Halualani (1995), Holt (1996), Robinson (1996), Tajima (1989), Tolentino (1996), Villapando (1989), and Wilson (1988). See the work of Gonzalez and Rodriguez (2003) for a provocative critical examination of representations of Filipinas on the web, including mail-order brides. See Arvidsson’s (2006) study on the role of branding and fantasy in Internet dating.

2. By “communities” I do not mean to imply that they are somehow egalitarian, democratic, or undifferentiated, but point instead to forms of virtual sociality that are formed through regular and patterned social interactions. A sizable body of early literature has shown that online communities are complex, organized, and worthy of study (e.g., Bell 2001; Bell and Kennedy 2000; Hine 2000; Jacobson 1996, 1999; Lyman and Wake-
ford 1999; Miller and Slater 2000; Rheingold 1992; Stone 1995). Scholars of new media have argued that the Internet is far from the utopian site once imagined (E. G. Coleman 2010). Although it offers opportunities for counterhegemonic or subversive voices (Hudson 2007), inequalities such as those of gender and race are often reproduced online (Burkhalter 1999; Nakamura 2007; O’Brien 1999; Smith and Kollok 1999). Gonzalez and Rodriguez show how gendered and raced inequalities continue to be reproduced and how, “in cyberspace, the ideologies and technologies of racialization and sexualization materialize on the Filipina body” (2003, 219).

3. My wider project focused on Chinese women and Filipinas, but this chapter focuses exclusively on the U.S. and Filipino dimension.


5. Robert Scholes (1999) notes that within the 202 introduction agencies he located in 1998, 70 percent of the women were Filipino.

6. Images of Russian and Eastern European women were more suggestive or explicitly sexy.

7. Names of listservs and their participants are pseudonyms.

8. It is noteworthy that I was admitted to the “men’s” list but not to the women’s. The moderators may have assumed that I would learn more from that list, that they could keep a better eye on me there, or—as others have noted—that my status as a Westerner placed me in a position that was more analogous to that of the men (and the few Western women) on the list. The overall result was that I had greater contact with the Western men than Filipinas on FAF.

9. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), part of the U.S. Department of Justice, ceased to exist in 2003. It has since been replaced by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The enforcement and investigative section is U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

10. The men I met through these Internet groups seemed to fit the overall sociological and demographic profile found in other studies. Although UFG members self-selected from those who belonged to FAF and were willing to communicate with me, their views did not seem to differ much from men I met in person or on other lists. Comparing UFG communications with archived messages from the other private lists reflects little difference in content or tone. Moreover, although individuals can and do “invent” identities and role-play on the Internet, it would be difficult to maintain such
a charade for two or three years, just as it is difficult to do in repeated and prolonged face-to-face fieldwork encounters. See, for example, Michael Lewis, “Jonathan Lebed: Stock Manipulator, S.E.C. Nemesis—and 15,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 2001; Michael Lewis, “Faking It: The Internet Revolution Has Nothing to Do with the Nasdaq,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 15, 2001; and the work of Stone (1995) and Van Gelder (1996). On all the lists, men policed and criticized one another openly. Some moderators explicitly defined “off topics” and banned flamers or those who presented blatantly racist views or what were considered sexual perversions. Although sometimes criticized, disparaging remarks about Western women and discussions of the advantages of Asian spouses were voiced openly. My presence did not seem to promote much self-censorship or political correctness.


12. Ordonez points out that the legislation enacted in 1990 to “ban personal advertising and to penalize local recruiters” has done little to stop the “supply of Filipino women,” because women are easily recruited among OFWs and through other means (1997, 137).

13. See Vergara’s (1996) analysis of how “departure” may be viewed as “betrayal of the nation.”
