FILIPINO WOMEN, SEXUAL POLITICS, AND
THE GENDERED RACIST DISCOURSE OF
THE MAIL ORDER BRIDE

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Abstract
"Mail order bride" has become a powerful signifier of the identity and
culture of the Filipina in popular Australian imaginings and
representations of the "Asian" Other. This paper examines the media
construction of the "Filipino mail order bride." It argues that the discourse
of the mail order bride opens up a space in which acts of a dangerous
sexual politics become normalised and naturalised. Empirical evidence
is provided by an analysis of five media texts with a particular focus on
the reporting of instances of violence against Filipinas: although the
reporting may seem sympathetic, the media nevertheless create a reverse
discourse of the Filipina as victim and locate the key to violence within
her presumed culture by not moving beyond the discourse of "mail order
bride" and its orientalist and culturalist cognates. The article examines
the organised resistance of Filipinas, and shows that such resistance
involves a rejection of the "truth" of those patriarchal discourses that
undermine their basic human rights and a claim to identity and
citizenship in terms of the classic Western discourse of liberty and equality.

[T]he imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively
upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an
Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an
Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality
but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.
— Said 1994, 8

The media's preference for stereotyped images means that it is only able to provide
limited contextual information, with the result that those who are outside that
context are symbolically annihilated and so Filipino women who are not "brides" do not exist. Social constructions in relation to a minority group have certain consequences for Filipino women: that of improving or diminishing their standing in the community or, in some cases, redressing an injustice such as murders or domestic violence.

— Mowatt and Wall 1992, 12

"Mail order bride" is a pejorative term used to describe females from the Philippines who marry Australian men. Although the term has assumed objective status and become a powerful signifier of the identity and culture of the Filipina in popular Australian representations of the "Asian" Other, it is not a natural entity or neutral description of objective truth. There is no essential subject, experience, or event prior to language and forms of description (Hacking 1986; Weedon 1987). As Foucault argues, every way in which the individual can be conceptualised as a person and an agent has been constituted within discourse (1972). This article argues that the discursive construction of the "Filipino mail order bride" by the media opens up a space in which acts of a dangerous sexual politics are normalised and naturalised. In other words, such acts become an essential quality of the Filipina herself and, consequently, take on the character of the norm. Following Eisenstein (1984) and Pettman (1992), I employ the concept of sexual politics to highlight the political dimension of the relationships between men and women.

The introductory section of this paper presents an overview of the discourses of the mail order bride, orientalism, and culturalism that together form the dominant image of Filipino women in the Australian media. The second section consists of a media analysis which provides empirical evidence of these discourses in five specific texts. Firstly, recent stereotypical representations of Filipinas in film are examined: Filipina Dreamgirls discursively constructs the Filipina as synonymous with the "mail order bride" agencies and "girlie bars" of Manila while The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert articulates the dominant discourse of the Filipino mail order bride in Australia. It is contended that it is through this negative construction that Filipinas come to represent those forces perceived as outside the moral boundaries of the community in which fairness and justice can be expected to prevail. Next, I focus on the reporting of instances of violence against Filipinas in the print media. Although the reporting may seem sympathetic, the media nevertheless create a reverse discourse of the Filipina as victim and locate the key to violence within her presumed culture by not moving beyond the discourse of the mail order bride and its orientalist and culturalist cognates. In the final section, I argue that the power of "mail order bride" discourse is not absolute but generates practices of resistance. The article examines the resistance of Filipinas as channelled through the New South Wales (NSW) Filipino Women's Working Party, the Collective of Filipinas for Empowerment and Development, and the Centre for Philippine Concerns Australia. It shows that such resistance
involves a rejection of the “truth” of those patriarchal discourses that undermine their basic human rights, and a claim to identity and citizenship in terms of the classic Western discourse of liberty and equality.

DISCOURSES OF THE MAIL ORDER BRIDE, ORIENTALISM, AND CULTURALISM

In order to examine the relationship between the discourse of the mail order bride and dangerous sexual politics, it is necessary to situate the discourse in an historical context. Australia is a nation historically premised on the intersecting power relations of racism, class, and a sexism that creates a widespread tolerance of violence against women (Easteal 1994; Doyal 1995). For those migrant women from stigmatised groups whose “race,” culture, and ethnic identity are represented as problematic and Other, sexual oppression has often been compounded by racism (Pettman 1992). In this context, the representation of Filipinas in terms of the mail order bride may be read as a nexus of sexism and racism that constitutes a site of danger for those women so defined. As a gendered racism, the discourse must be understood as a major factor in undermining the health, status, and basic human rights of Filipinas in Australia. By “health” I do not mean simply the absence of disease, but a state of well-being and positive self-identity that is profoundly influenced by historical developments, contemporary socio-economic realities, and the social relations characterising people’s lives (Alcorso and Schofield 1991; Doyal 1995; Legge 1989; Ahmad 1993).

The use of the term “mail order bride” to represent Filipinas and characterise a whole spectrum of ways in which couples meet and marry, simultaneously creates a negative image of the women and their marriages to Australian men and obscures the actuality of their everyday lives. “Mail order” evokes images of sexualised and commercial catalogue items passively awaiting selection and acquisition by the male consumer (Robinson 1996). Such a vision of pre-packaged bodies feeds into patriarchal concepts of women as property to be bought and sold. The term “mail order” negatively characterises the Filipina’s desire for an improvement in her personal and economic situation as a deviant motivation for marriage. However, a desire for a better life is an instrumental aspect that is presumably present in most marriages and not peculiar to a specific ethnic group. The notion of “bride” is no less negative as it denies Filipinas autonomy and an identity separate from that of their male partners. What is rendered invisible by the mail order bride discourse is the fact that many Filipinas migrated to Australia as professionals (nurses, for example) or as part of the family reunion system and have subsequently married Australian men.

There has been a discursive continuity in the construction of Filipina-Australian marriages as “mail order” in the sense that they are often situated in the context
of the introduction agencies and pen pal columns of the 1970s and 1980s which advertised Filipinas for marriage. The discourse continues to circulate without radically changing its basic form, obscuring the fact that most Filipina-Australian couples today do not meet through introduction agencies (Navarro-Tolentino 1992). The report of Iredale, Innes, and Castles (1992) into serial sponsorship pointed out that the major means by which Australian men meet female partners from the Philippines is through informal networks that were established by Filipinas who had previously migrated to Australia. These networks allow the personal introduction of Australian men to female family members and friends in the Philippines. For example, many of the Filipinas who came to train as nurses in various Sydney hospitals and the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Newcastle during the 1970s and early 1980s met and married Australian men and subsequently set up such networks. Matchmaking along these lines is not a deviant activity or solely confined to Filipinas, but is a feature of many marriages within diverse ethnic groups.

The stereotype of the mail order bride does not stand in isolation but requires a network of other stereotypical representations for its successful signification as "truth." Underpinning commonsense knowledges of Filipinas as mail order brides are orientalist discourses through which those designated "Asian" are given meaning. Said argues that orientalism, as a Western discourse which constitutes the "Orient" as a unified "racial," cultural, and geographical entity, is a way of coming to terms with the Orient "by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (1994, 3). In orientalist discourse, the dominant representation of "Orientals" is of exotic, inferior, and backward creatures subject to European superiority and the dominance of the West (Said 1994; Bhabha 1994; Broinowski 1992). This construction of the Orient and its inhabitants as Other has allowed Europe to define itself positively as a contrasting image and experience and, simultaneously, provided justification for European colonialism in the Orient (Said 1994). Orientalism has a long history in Australia. Extending from anti-Chinese propaganda during the 1850s gold rushes and the White Australia policy embodied in the "racially" restrictive immigration act of 1901, to contemporary debates over "Asian" immigration in which historian Geoffrey Blainey and others attack the "Asianisation of Australia" and its consequent destruction of the "Australian way of life," those from the "Orient" have been constructed in terms of the "Yellow Peril"—as inevitably Other (Bottomley and de Lepervanche 1990; Pettman 1991, 1992; Jupp 1990). The recent comments of Pauline Hanson, the Independent MP, continue to fuel the orientalist discourses of the Blainey debate. In the next section, it is argued that orientalist discourses that produce the "truth" of the Filipina as both the embodiment of a rampant sexuality and the source and salvation of traditional family values normalize and naturalize acts of a dangerous sexual politics.

In addition to orientalist images, the discourse of the mail order bride is replete with culturalist assumptions. "Culturalism" is a term used to describe the
invocation of discourses that invoke culture as an explanation for the social situation, experiences, and disadvantages of migrants, thereby obscuring structural power relations of racism, sexism, and class oppression in the host country (Pettman 1992; Bottomley and de Lepervanche 1990). Culturalism individualises acts of violence and exploitation by locating the key to these social phenomena within the presumed culture or personal traits of the Filipina. In this manner, “mail order bride” status as “culture” becomes an explanatory device determining a causal relationship between the existence of the Filipina and her selection for violence. By inextricably linking the fate of the Filipina with her status as a mail order bride, violence and sexual exploitation are normalised and naturalised. Thus, discourses of culturalism allow the reconstruction of violence as a fault located within the Filipina herself and open up a space in which male responsibility for violence is often rendered secondary.

MEDIA DISCOURSES

The mass media has the ability to construct “truths,” homogenise identities, and shape perceptions of social reality through stereotypical representations. According to the NSW FWWP, it is the sensationalist media portrayal of Filipinas as “brides” and sex objects, and in relation to prostitution that has created a negative perception of all Filipinas and their settlement in Australia (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW 1992; Mowatt and Wall 1992). In what follows, I present an analysis of media texts that draw upon discourses of the mail order bride, orientalism, and culturalism in their representations of the Filipina. Such representations suggest sexual commodification and trade. An existential state as a commercial and sexually available object is a profanity that undermines the cherished and sacred myth of marriage as a love-match which is seen to be the “norm” of marriage in Australia (Robinson 1996). As Robinson argues:

> The women ... were seen to be acting on an illegitimate basis .... This apparent transgression of the ideology of romantic love allowed the women to be branded as grasping opportunists, nothing better than prostitutes. The more sympathetic version had them as sex slaves, forced to sell their bodies in (obviously) loveless marriages. (Robinson 1996, 56)

This media Othering may be read as a major force in the creation of a negative social milieu in which acts of a dangerous sexual politics become normalised and naturalised. Such a process obscures the politics and interests that shape violence.

A central theme running through the British film Filipina Dreamgirls (1991, directed by Les Blair) is the sex trade/tourism of the Philippines which finds its concrete expression in the mail order bride agencies and “girlie bars” of Ermita. George Trout, the tour guide, makes the situation clear from the outset:

> They are not seventy-five quid each you know. You can have as many as you like ...
> How are you going to choose? ... There is a right way and a wrong way to being a sexual tourist [in the Philippines] ... They cost ... the same as bed and breakfast.
While the film could be read as a portrayal of the stupidity of the Welshmen seeking brides, its stereotypical representation of the women as both sexually voracious and the carriers of traditional familial values creates narrow and distorted images. On one hand, Rosetta the “bar girl” reinforces the image of “brides” as prostitutes and their links to sex tours and girllie bars. The logical conclusion of such a marriage, as revealed at the end of the film, is a wife who merely changes the location of sexual indecency from the Philippines to England by helping her husband manage the Oriental Escort Service. On the other hand, Martita the maid, described by George Trout as “a good little worker” and admired by Preston as the embodiment of traditional values, symbolises the Filipina as quiet, submissive, and domestic. These orientalist discourses are part of the patriarchal whore/angel dichotomy for conceptualising women. Such essentialist, reified ontologies homogenise identities and impose a false unity upon a multiplicity of diverse subjectivities, thus making opaque the many differences between Filipinas.

By drawing upon themes of sensual sex slave and subservience, Filipina Dreamgirls constructs the Filipina as a sexual “piece of meat” always available to satisfy male carnal desires. For example one of the main characters explains:

I’ve always had a thing about oriental women. And I saw this thing in the paper about all those blokes who were getting these tiny Filipino girls and making sex slaves of them. And I thought, well, put me down for one of those!

Another, the Australian bar owner, locates the subservience of the Filipina in a racist discourse of stupidity and animality:

Don’t be angry with her. She can’t help it. She’s stupid. She’s a Filipina..... The Filipina is the last real woman left on earth ... the last real woman. She’ll do anything for you. Anything. You name it, she’ll do it. Give you a shower, wash your dirty panties ... She’ll do anything for you. And she’s stupid, stupid like a monkey.

As Robinson argues, these particular constructions can be understood as constructions of the Other in the Australian quest for self-identity. The dominant negative stereotype of sensual sex slave relates both to issues of female subordination in our own society and to the ideological justification of Australia’s position as an affluent country in a region of the world where poverty is still ubiquitous and the norm (Robinson 1996).

In the popular Australian film The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994, directed by Stephan Elliot), a major current of “humour” is around Cynthia, the mail order bride from the Philippines. She is the archetype of the Filipina in Australia: an opportunistic and mercenary bar girl, morally lax and seductive, the embodiment of rampant sexuality. Cynthia is juxtaposed with the honest, hard-working Aussie male she conned into marriage. The bewilderment that is experienced by the main characters regarding this marriage is expressed in the statement: “Did you catch that mail order bride? Why did he marry her?” Later, the full extent of Cynthia’s opportunism is revealed by means of a flashback:

Bob: [waking up in a hotel room in the Philippines] Who are you?
Cynthia: I your wife.
Bob: Guess I’ll be going home then [to Australia].
Cynthia: No you no going. I coming too. I your wife. See! I your wife [waving a marriage contract].

And later:
Bob: Silly girl. Should of done her homework better. She thought I was in Sydney!
Mitzi: Why in God’s name did you bring her home?
Bob: She was my wife
Felicia: Couldn’t you sell her off?

As considerable time is devoted to Cynthia’s act of popping ping pong balls from her vagina, the film suggests that sexual lewdness is something intrinsic to Filipinas. The statement uttered by Cynthia, “I no like you anyway. You got little ding-a-ling,” vividly captures the construction of the “Oriental” whore whose obsession with male genitalia and sexuality places her outside the moral boundaries of “respectable” womanhood. It could be argued that it is through such a negative construction that Filipinas come to represent those forces perceived as outside the moral community. As Opotow (1990) and Erikson (1962) argue, human groups construct moral boundaries to differentiate between kinds of experience and existential states that belong within the sphere of their group and those areas of being which lie outside its immediate borders. While considerations of fairness and justice apply to those included within the moral community, those forces morally excluded are located beyond the scope of justice and often achieve the status of undeserving and expendable Other, and consequently harming or exploiting them appears legitimate, appropriate, and understandable (Opotow 1990).

Images of Filipinas as both the embodiment of a rampant sexuality and the salvation of traditional family values have concrete power effects. They position many Filipinas in terms of a dangerous sexual politics in which their basic human rights are abrogated. For example, popular conceptions of the Filipina as morally lax, exotic, and available create an image of women who are “naturally” positioned to perform sexual servicing and, concomitantly, naturalises the rights of men to demand such servicing. Moreover, their representation as submissive, passive, and obedient opens up a space that allows male domination and the denial of male responsibility for violence through strategies of victim blaming. Pettman (1992) points out that in some cases Australian men seek pliant, passive, and sexually exotic wives and may express violence against these women when they do not conform to the popular stereotype. Further, the power effects of orientalist discourses extend beyond the milieu of personal gender relationships to the sphere of capitalist enterprise where the exploitation of Filipinas may be justified and sanctioned as a “natural” consequence of their oriental Otherness (de Lepervanche 1991).

The reporting of actual violence against Filipino women by the news media (“Bloody Finish” 1995, 10; Lowe 1988, 3; and Dibben 1995, 66, 95) remains fixed within the mail order bride discourse. Moreover, the accounts articulate explicitly
culturalist assumptions in that they locate the key to murder within the Filipina’s presumed “culture.” Although Lowe and Dibben endeavour to present sympathetic accounts, they nevertheless create a reverse discourse of the Filipina as victim by not moving beyond the discourse of the mail order bride and its orientalist and culturalist cognates. Foucault defines a reverse discourse as one which “circulate[s] without changing [its] form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy” (1978, 102). By constraining Filipino women within the conceptualisation of the mail order bride, the reverse discourse of victim does not challenge the dominant discourse but reinforces and compounds it.

In its report on the murder of a Filipino woman, Susana Blackwell, by her husband in the United States, the *Newcastle Herald* (1995, 10), locates the key to the murder within her presumed “culture.” Murder becomes an essential quality of Susana herself. The articulation of the “facts” that:

- Timothy Blackwell met and married his mail-order bride in the Philippines ... [and] he contended that Susana Remerata Blackwell duped him into marriage, in part so she could live in the US ....

and:

- He went to the Philippines to meet her for the first time and they married there on March 31, 1993. He returned to the US and she followed him on February 5, 1994. Less than two weeks later, on February 17, they separated and Mr Blackwell filed for an annulment ....

inextricably links Susana’s selection for murder with her status as an opportunistic and deceitful “mail-order bride.” The authoritativeness and credibility of the legal expert reinforces this nexus:

- Mr Jeffrey Cyrus Mirsepasy, who represented Mr Blackwell when he filed the annulment petition, said the man worked for a computer company and found his wife through an international matchmaking service.

In this manner, the text provides the reader with a framework for understanding the violence that followed. It is the Filipina’s existential state as mail order bride that precipitates the violence perpetrated against her: considering the circumstances, such women are likely to become victims.

Similarly a newspaper article titled “Mail Order Misery” (Lowe 1988, 3), although it attempts to present a sympathetic discussion about Filipinas and domestic violence, nevertheless creates a reverse discourse of the Filipina as victim because of her oriental and cultural identity. Once again, violence becomes explicable in terms of the “mail order bride” status. This tends to reinforce and perpetuate the stereotype of the Filipina as Other, somehow different from Anglo women. The following statement implies that it is because the women are Filipinas that they have problems:

- the problem of domestic violence in mail-order marriages is expected to grow as more Filipina brides are brought to Australia ....

Violence becomes individualised and located within the milieu of the Filipina, making opaque the fact that male violence against female partners is a feature of
a significant proportion of Australian marriages. The article’s continual linking of “mail-order brides” and violence and its comments regarding the frequency of domestic violence cases involving Filipinas reinforces victim status and gives the impression of an unusual social pattern. This is apparent in the following statements:

I met Nolita at a social gathering of former residents of a women’s refuge in Melbourne that caters specifically for bashed and abused Filipina mail-order brides. Her story of the cruelty meted out by her husband matched in substance, if not in detail, the narratives of other mail-order brides at the gathering and:

Scores of marriages between Australians and mail-order brides from the Philippines are ending in similar trauma and social workers report an alarmingly high proportion of mail-order brides seeking help at women’s emergency shelters.

Such reporting obscures the widespread domestic violence that is perpetrated against women from all ethnic backgrounds and presents a distorted image of marriage between Filipinas and Australian men as inevitably involving violence. The article solves the problem of how to understand domestic violence by allowing the reader to pity the Filipina while simultaneously reaffirming the mail order bride discourse. It compounds the problems around the representation of identity by constructing a victim paradigm which essentially denies Filipino women agency and positions them as powerless.

Dibben’s article, “Murder By Mail-Order,” appeared as a special report in the Sunday Mail (1995, 66, 95). Culturalist and oriental assumptions and sensationalist journalism combine to create a victim discourse which mars an otherwise sympathetic account. Once again “mail order” status, as indicated by the title, provides a commonsense explanation for the murders of the Filipinas who are listed on the page. This is reinforced by an unfortunate juxtaposition of the main story concerning the deaths with a sub-heading, “Study tour will target sex tourism and trafficking in Filipino women,” which implies an association between the murdered women and sex tours in the Philippines. The text draws upon mail order bride discourse to describe Filipinas even when the grounds for doing so are especially tenuous and the report itself contains information that undermines such a stereotype. A few examples will serve to demonstrate. The inclusion of the death of Teresita Andalis implies that a marital relationship existed between the victim and her killer. However, Teresita was not married to her murderer. The report informs us that he was her employer and she came to Australia as a domestic aide. A similar distortion concerns the deaths of Teresita and Normita Garret who were not murdered but committed suicide with their husbands. Elma Young was a professional nurse. She met her future husband while holidaying in Australia from Saudi Arabia, where she had been nursing for several years. After migrating here, sponsored by her sister, Elma began seeing Paul, and after several months they were married. (Dibben 1995, 66,95)

Dibben’s characterisation of Elma as a “mail order bride” reinforces the stereotype and obscures other modes of migration to Australia. By including the murders of
several children, Elizabeth Haynes, Yohana Rodríguez, and Lusanta de Groot’s baby, the report constructs their deaths as intrinsically caught up with the mother’s identity as a mail order bride. On another level, this suggestion that “mail order bride-ness” extends beyond the immediate body of the Filipina to become the explanation for her child’s murder, exemplifies the patriarchal discourse that mothers are solely responsible for the welfare of their children. Dibben’s report clearly illustrates how well-meaning authors can exacerbate the problem of violence towards women by falling into the trap of creating a reverse discourse which remains locked within the dominant discourse of the mail order bride.

RESISTANCE

It is a fundamental premise of Foucault’s theories of truth and power that discourses are never absolute but generate resistance (Foucault 1978). From this perspective, the discourse of the mail order bride is:

both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault 1978, 101)

The Filipina is not a passive victim of externally imposed constructions of her identity. Representations like those just analysed that construct a victim paradigm for Filipinas and position them as powerless are ahistorical and elitist. Through their refusal of gendered racist stereotypes that represent them as Other, Filipinas are actively engaged in resistance and the subversion of patriarchal power. Of course, material power relations, inhering as they do in institutional bases, cannot be changed merely at the level of language. But there is always the possibility for resistance. Political mobilisation for many Filipino women takes the form of membership in organisations such as the NSW Filipino Women’s Working Party (FWWP), the Collective of Filipinas for Empowerment and Development (CFED), and the Centre for Philippine Concerns Australia (CPCA). The resistance of Filipinas in these organisations involves a rejection of the “truth” of the derogatory mail order bride conception and a claim to identity and citizenship in terms of the classic Western discourse of liberty and equality. In what follows, a brief delineation of the discursive forms of that resistance is provided. In particular, I focus on the FWWP.

Formed in 1990 to advocate on behalf of Filipino women migrants, the FWWP has politicised areas of major concern to Filipinas by placing the issues of serial sponsorship, the negative media portrayal of Filipinas as “brides” and sex objects, and the violence perpetrated on some Filipino wives on government agendas. From its inception, the FWWP focused on media issues and set about addressing the negative effect on the Filipino community as a whole of the media representation of Filipino women as mindless, or just “marriage industry” objects. (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW 1992, 35)
The report of FWWP, *Filipino Women: Challenges and Responses* (1989–1991) (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, 1992), identified the need to develop a media training kit/course manual as a resource for both the media and community spokespersons to produce a balanced portrayal of Filipinas in the Australian media. Funded by the Ethnic Affairs Commission, *Dealing with the Media* (Mowatt and Wall 1992) was a direct challenge to the dominant discourse of the mail order bride. It brought to media attention the need for an informed reporting of Filipinas and aimed to provide spokespersons for Filipino women with skills to analyse media texts and deal more effectively with the media in order to counter negative stereotypes. Another media project of the FWWP was the development and broadcast of a radio information program (Guanio-Bartels and Fe-Pua 1994) which was especially designed to reach Filipinas in rural areas and increase their level of awareness about issues such as racism. Episode 11 explored the many facets of racism and offered practical advice on how to deal with it. By providing such information, the FWWP aimed to empower Filipinas with the knowledge to challenge racist discourses and practices.

The CFED actively mobilised in the Justice for Gene Bongcodin campaign. Directed by Melba Marginson, this campaign was a protest against the injustice of the light sentence Gene’s ex-husband was given for her murder and it culminated on the steps of the Supreme Court (Marginson 1992). By means of the campaign, the CFED and other Filipino women’s groups drew attention to the unfairness of the Australian legal system to women, in particular Filipinas. Furthermore, as Marginson notes (1992, 122), the involvement of the CFED presented the Victorian public with an image of militant and articulate Filipinas. The dominant stereotype of Filipinas as mail order brides was thus called into question.

One of the more recent campaigns of the CPCA was the Campaign Against Sex Tourism and Trafficking in Filipino Women. The campaign consisted of a study tour to the Philippines in 1995 which targeted the sex tour operators there, some of whom were Australian. At the Newcastle Migrant Resource Centre on 11 August 1995 a forum was conducted by Jane Queripel, CPCANSW Branch, and Meredith Burgmann, Member Legislative Council NSW, who were members of the study tour. One of the issues to arise from the forum was that the stereotype of Filipinas as docile, domesticated sex slaves and mail order brides had contributed to their exploitation and fed into the sex tour business. The CPCA has actively resisted this negative image by moving the focus of their investigations from the assumed “intrinsic” characteristics of Filipinas to the activities of the entrepreneurs—mainly male—who promote the exploitation of Filipino women for monetary gain.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the media construction of the Filipino mail order bride. It has argued that the media Othering of Filipinas through discourse opens up a
space in which acts of a dangerous sexual politics, such as the violent abuse of her body and even murder, become normalised and naturalised. A media analysis has demonstrated that the stereotypical representation of Filipino women in terms of the discourse of the mail order bride, deriving from broader orientalist and culturalist discourses, is alive and well in the 1990s. The portrayal of the Filipina in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* as an opportunistic and mercenary bar girl creates a narrow and distorted image of Filipinas and is particularly disappointing in a film that in many respects is a celebration of difference. Newspaper articles reporting violence against Filipinas articulate explicitly culturalist assumptions in that they locate the key to murder within the Filipina’s presumed “culture.” Violence becomes explicable in terms of the mail order bride status. Such constructions make opaque the fact that male violence against female partners is a common experience for many women in Australian society and render male responsibility for violence secondary. While the authors may have intended to present sympathetic accounts, they have in fact created a reverse discourse of the Filipina as victim which remains locked within the dominant discourse of the mail order bride. This construction of a victim paradigm does not challenge the dominant discourse but reinforces and compounds it, essentially denying Filipino women agency and undermining their power. On the other hand, discursive forms of Filipino women’s resistance to the mail order bride conception are channelled through organisations like the FWWP, CFED, and the CPCA.

Although the media continue to represent Filipinas in a narrow and distorted way, it simultaneously generates scrutiny of its coverage which in turn opens up the possibilities for more informed reporting. As Wall (qtd in Mowatt and Wall 1992, 14) suggests:

> The challenge both for the media and the community at large is how to present social injustice such as that relating to exploitative relationships while, at the same time, ensuring that other Filipinos are not stigmatised and deprived of a balanced and informed representation. If the media is encouraged to cover a range of issues that equally affect the whole community, that surely is a step in the right direction.

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**NOTES**

1. Although I use the terms “Filipino women” and “Filipinas” interchangeably, as both are common in Australia, neither is technically or grammatically correct. In the
Philippines, “Filipino” is not an adjective but a noun and refers to a male, and “Filipinas,” or “Pilipinas,” is not the plural of Filipina but is another word for the actual country, the Philippines. The correct term for more than one Filipina (female) is mga Filipina.

2 This paper is specifically an interrogation and critique of the media construction of Filipinas as mail order brides. I do not address the background in the Philippines which encourages migration for marriage or the actuality of everyday life for female migrants from the Philippines in Australia, both of which are outside the scope of the paper. The study by Roces (1996) is an excellent discussion of these issues. Dealing with the Media (Mowatt and Wall 1992), a project of the FWWP, provides a brief historical overview of the role and status of Filipino women in the Philippines and puts into perspective the history of their immigration to Australia and consequent settlement issues.

3 The concept of reverse discourse originates in the work of Michel Foucault. In The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction, Foucault suggests that nineteenth-century medico-psychiatric discourses on homosexuality as “perversity” made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse whereby homosexuality began to “demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, [but] often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (1978, 101) (emphasis added).

4 I would like to bring two points to attention. First, although I draw upon Foucault, as a feminist I recognise the problematic nature of his phallocentrism, his inability to account for the nexus between patriarchal discourse and the material interests of social groups, the often glaring neglect of resistance in his own work, and an inability to ground this work in a coherent normative standpoint. Secondly, in my use of patriarchy it is not my intention to suggest a universal, monolithic, immutable oppression of women. Rather, I recognise the historical and cultural specificity of patriarchal power, and that women experience different forms of patriarchal oppression in terms of their specific class and “race” positions and ethnic identities.

5 In April 1990, the Philippine government introduced legislation to ban introduction agencies in the Philippines from matching Filipino women for marriage to foreign nationals (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW 1992).

6 It should be noted that the reification of women within the Philippines produces an image of Filipinas very similar to the orientalist reificatory system in Australia. For example, Conrado de Quiros (1992, 14), a journalist for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, writes: “Women exist on a completely earthly or secular plane, at best blessed, like Mary, and at worst wretched, like Magdalene. Virgin and whore. Exalted and fallen. No wonder we embrace the idea with passion. That is exactly how we define women. Either they are exalted, in which case they are virgins, or they are fallen, in which case they are whores.” Writing about the Filipina, Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil (qtd in Perdon 1995, 9), the essayist, notes: “Chinese men find in her eyes the necessary upslant; the Japanese think her correctly small ... the people of the Near East note that she has the dark-eyed seductiveness of their own women.”

7 The men are similarly represented in stereotypical terms as invariably old, socially inadequate losers, dissatisfied with Welsh women, and incapable of forming relationships in their own country.

WORKS CITED


