

## The E-mail Order Bride as Postcolonial Other: Romancing the Filipina in Web-based Narratives

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*Romancing the Filipina on the Web is a nostalgic exercise that serves to reinforce the American colonialist ego, on the one hand, and Western-American machismo, on the other in the light of 9/11 and the continuing disintegration of familial units in the developed world. Significantly, these constructions are manifestly orientalist, partaking as they do of hysterical, hard-sell tactics. Here, the Filipina is a postcolonial Other who is simultaneously exoticized, eroticized and tribalized by means of fairy tale narratives that idealize intercultural marriages, testimonials from satisfied customers that guarantee success, and pictures that both tease and please the patriarchal gaze. Yet, while web space is hegemonic space, there are Baudellairian insurgencies within this textual domain that challenge the mail order bride imagology. These texts serve as blueprints for the de/reconstructionist agenda that seeks to articulate marginal voices in the new frontier that is the world-wide web.*

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This paper challenges the largely-accepted myth of world-wide web discourse as, essentially, occurring in democratic, liberative space. It argues that the internet, seen from a Foucauldian vantage point, is a knowledge center imbued with power. As a repository of information, this new medium is a signification system that defines, produces and constructs knowledge, a symbolic order that simultaneously creates, reinforces and destroys meanings and identities.

Developed in the West initially for military/defense purposes, the internet's potential for information networking was, at the outset, apparent only to academics in American universities, who became some of its first netizens. But it was only a matter of time before this new medium mutated into what is now a monolithic commercial enterprise that serves both to complement and supplement the Western, capitalist economic order.

As a Western innovation, this new information and economic technology created a virtual territory, the borders of which were already mapped out and appropriated by American corporations long before its exportation into information haven countries such as the Philippines. By 1999, for instance, most dot-com domains in the English language, considered as the primary yardstick for a strong virtual presence, belonged to US-based businesses (Katz 1999).

There now exists, then, a new and virtual cartography of knowledge and power that is, on the one hand, based on access to information and communication technologies and, on the other, rooted in the age-old economic demarcation between First and Third World countries particularly those that share a colonial past. Under this system, the internet and world-wide web, as knowledge structures, are fuelled by Western, capitalist, patriarchal and neo-colonial interests that put a price tag on information, even as it manufactures knowledge for commercial consumption. It is the aim of this paper to expose the ideological implications of this new knowledge structure through a critical examination of how web-based discourse constructs notions of the Filipina.

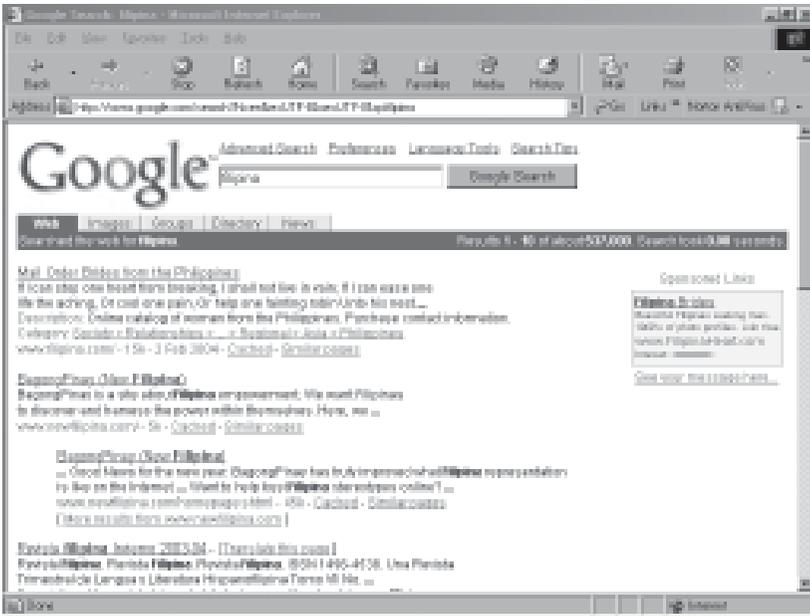
### **The Filipina as E-mail Order Bride: The Technological Construction of Identity in Cyborg Discourse**

As a database, the internet functions as a global virtual library. In this library, search engines act as virtual librarians by indexing websites into categories. For the information seeker, therefore, the search engine is a first-level gatekeeper imbued with the power to define.

There are three types of search engines based on their programming applications for indexing. The first of these are the fully-automated search engines, like Lycos, that use software programs called “spiders” or “crawlers” to locate related sites on the web. The second type of search engines, of which Yahoo! is an example, uses actual people to index sites. The third type, known as the hybrid search engine, uses both software and actual people for indexing websites.

Just as a library defines ideas and shapes knowledge through its choice of resources, the world-wide web defines concepts based on its selection of related sites. For the information seeker who is likely to be deluged with thousands upon thousands of search results, a search engine’s top ten listing is crucial. In the hypertextual scheme of things, these top results indicate relevance and popularity.

Given this knowledge structure, how do search engines define the Filipina? In my analysis of top ten results on the search term *Filipina* using the most popular search engines identified by the website Search Engine Watch (2001), eight out of every 10 links refer to mail order bride/penpal/introduction sites. A recent



Google search results on the term *Filipina* (Retrieved on February 5, 2004)



Delaney Davis and Josie Ponio (Retrieved from <http://www.asiangirlspenpals.com/delaney/album/t08.htm> on February 9, 2004)

<p><i>Huswagayong Monthly 10 May 1955</i></p>  <p><b>The good wife's guide</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready, on time for his return. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospect of a good meal (especially the favorite dish) is part of the warm welcome needed.</li> <li>• Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-worried people!</li> <li>• Be a little gay and a little more interesting for him. His looking may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it.</li> <li>• Clear away the clutter. Make one last trip through the main part of the house just before your husband arrives.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Huswagayong Monthly 10 May 1955</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather up schoolbooks, toys, paper etc and show him a district in your table.</li> <li>• Over the reader reaction of the year you should prepare and light a fire for him to stand by. Your husband will feel he has reached a haven of rest and comfort and it will give you a lift too. After all, coming for his comfort will provide you with increased personal satisfaction.</li> <li>• Prepare the children. Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces (if they are small, comb their hair and, if necessary, change their slacks). They are little innocents and he would like to see them playing the part. Make them all smile. At the time of his arrival, distribute all sides of the sweater, dryer or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet.</li> <li>• Be happy to see him.</li> <li>• Greet him with a warm smile and show sincerity in your desire to please him.</li> <li>• Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first - remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.</li> <li>• Make the evening his. Show sympathy if he comes home late or gives out to dinner, or other places of entertainment without you. Instead, try to understand his world of stress and pressure and his very real need to be at home and relax.</li> <li>• Your goal: Try to make sure your home is a place of peace, order and tranquillity where your husband can relax himself to body and spirit.</li> <li>• Don't greet him with complaints and protests.</li> <li>• Don't complain if he's late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night. Careful that a minute compared to what he might have gone through that day.</li> <li>• Make him comfortable. Have him lean back in a comfortable chair or have him lie down in the bedroom. Have a seat or warm drink ready for him.</li> <li>• Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soothing and pleasant voice.</li> <li>• Don't ask him questions about his activities or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always know the way with things and situations. You have no right to question him.</li> <li>• A good wife always knows her place.</li> </ul>
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(Above) The good wife's guide (Retrieved from <http://www.filipina.com/hwifeguide/html>, February 9, 2004)

(Left) A photograph as a narrative of "subservience" and "servitude" (Retrieved from <http://singlefilipina.com/members/CharlotteAbellana.htm> on February 9, 2004)

search on Google (2003), the world's largest search engine, presents similar results: 8 in 10 sites referring to the search term Filipina are links to mail order bride sites. Simply put, on the web, the "Filipina" is synonymized with, and reduced to, "mail order brides."

In this discursive construction, there is also no significant differentiation between the human and the technical. Search engines that use human discretion in the indexing process are as likely as fully-automated ones to churn out the Filipina-as-mail-order-bride signification. Here, clearly, Haraway's (1991) description of cyborg discourse finds fruition; the Filipina as a techno-ideological construct is at once "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as fiction" (149).

Indeed, the world-wide web has reconfigured the mail order bride industry into a virtual, e-mail order bride phenomenon. Made illegal in the Philippines through the enactment in 1991 of R.A. 6955, otherwise known as the Anti-Mail Order Bride Law, and recently, of R.A. 9028, or the Anti-Trafficking of Persons Act, these services, in their present transmuted web-based forms, pose serious political implications for legal enforcement. These laws, after all, have jurisdiction only over the physical-material and not the virtual, meta-corporeal.

Tolentino (2001) suggests that in the pre-web mail order bride signification, the Filipino-American romance was idealized, using obsolescent postal and printing technologies. In the reconfigured web-based, high-tech signification, Western capitalist power retains its privileged status, and lays claim to the past, present and future as temporal-spatial loci of ideological domination. In their representation of Filipina women as docile, subservient and ideal wives for First-World, primarily American husbands, these sites echo the tenor of mail order bride catalogues that were in circulation for Western consumption during the 1980s and early 1990s. At the same time, by using such features as custom search, e-mail forwarding and electronic shopping, these sites lay the foundation for what could be the future characteristics of socio-romantic relationships in the Information Society – mediated, virtualized and commodified.

### **Fairy-tale Narratives and the Filipina as Postcolonial Other**

The Filipina-as-e-mail-order-bride construct is created in the web by means of a host of multimedia texts and narratives that serve to satisfy what Said (1978) identifies as Western orientalist fantasies. Here, she is reduced to a postcolonial Other whose value and signification is rooted in the Western/American colonial domination of the Philippines. In the recurring, fairy-tale rescue narrative, the Filipina, as Third-World wife plays damsel-in-distress to the Western/American's First-World husband, knight-in-shining-armor archetype. In the story of Filipino-American romance, the damsel is rescued many times over: from Spanish oppression at the turn of the century, from Japanese atrocity during World War II and from the shackles of poverty in the present time.

Delaney Davis (2003), owner of the mail order bride site *filipinalady.com*, exploits the rescue narrative and enjoins would-be clients to "join the adventure." He himself met his wife, Josie

Ponio, on a web-based mail order bride service. In his site, Davis chronicles his romance with Josie, and their subsequent marriage, through pictures and stories. His narratives serve the dual function of advertisement aimed at enticing potential customers and boastful proprietorship over his young, Filipina wife.

Davis adds to the visual-sensory experience of voyeurism by exploiting the web's multimedia features. By posting audio files of his phone conversations with Josie, Davis demonstrates both the visual and aural capabilities of this new medium. Thus, the Western consumer becomes both spectator and eavesdropper as his experience becomes audiovisual. At one point, Davis asks Josie to sing, a request that she readily complies with. Amidst the static of transatlantic telecommunications that could imply distance, desperation or devotion she sings "How do I live without you?" The song, however, is not a question but an affirmation of subordination, hegemony disguised as romance.

Indeed, romancing the Filipina on the web is a nostalgic exercise for Western/American machismo and the (neo)colonialist ego in the light of rising divorce rates and the continuing disintegration of familial units in the developed world. Thus, as e-mail order bride, the Filipina is othered not just against the Western man, but also, and more significantly, against the Western woman. She is, in these narratives, what the Western woman once was, and no longer is: home-and husband-bound.

One particular hyperlink in the website Filipina.com (2003) is telling. It links the reader to what appears to be a scanned copy of a text from *Housekeeping Monthly* circa 1955. Entitled "The Good Wife's Guide," the text presents a list of duties for the ideal wife including the cautionary advice "don't question his judgment...you have no right to question him" and "a good wife always knows her place."

Still, in web discourse, the central text upon which the Western gaze is focused, and through which its fantasies are realized, is the Filipina's photograph. This, in itself, is a narrative that must conform to the whole e-mail order bride construct of subservience and servitude: smile but be reserved, be sensual but do not be overly sexy. Reduced to a mere head shot and circumscribed within a few pre-ordained details important to patriarchal sensibilities (such as age, vital statistics, civil and maternal status), the Filipina is a disembodied and disempowered commodity hoping to be chosen, waiting to be bought.





A subversive mail order bride (Retrieved from <http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com> in 2001)

## Subverting the Imagology

Thus far, this paper has described the internet and its techno-ideological construct of the Filipina-as-e-mail-order-bride as a discursive plane within which pejorative imagologies of gender, race, ethnicity and identity are formed and reinforced by means of subjugating narratives of otherness. While this, indeed, is the dominant imagology of Filipina identity in web-based discourse, it would be erroneous to assume that this is the only one. Already, texts that subvert the patriarchal construction of the Filipina are taking root in the web.

Foremost among these countertexts is the website *newfilipina.com*. The nomenclature alone suggests a progression towards empowerment. Founded in 1998, specifically to counter the mail order bride imagology, this site is now home to a large community of Filipino women and men advocating gender and racial equality and equity. "I have a choice," the site (2001) proclaims, "I can be who I want to be. I can go where I want to go. I am proud of myself. I am the New Filipina."

Less serious in tenor, although equally subversive is the site *bigbadchinesemama.com*. The site (2001) disguises and even promotes itself as a mail order bride site. By so doing, it lures unknowing Western men into a biting critique of the whole mail order bride discourse. One of the site's more powerful texts is a photograph of a supposed mail order bride with her back to the camera, thereby denying and frustrating the satisfaction of the patriarchal gaze. She places her right hand at the back of her head with an extended middle finger that is self-empowering in its castratory signification.

While *newfilipina.com* and *bigbadchinesemama.com* are but isolated efforts in the struggle against Western hegemony over virtual territories, they are nevertheless commendable case studies of resistance that provide proof to the Foucauldian adage that where there is power, there is struggle.

This paper submits that the postcolonial agenda in the information age is a continuing struggle for discovery and creativity. As such, countertexts and counterdiscourses that seek to (re)claim virtual spaces must be found, created, multiplied and virally infused into online discourse. The postcolonial struggle in this virtual territory, therefore, must begin with a critical interrogation of the ideological presumptions that are forced upon the new media and its implications on gender, culture and identity.

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On-line sources:

[www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com)  
[www.filipina.com](http://www.filipina.com)  
[www.filipinalady.com](http://www.filipinalady.com)  
[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)  
[www.newfilipina.com](http://www.newfilipina.com)

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