

# Introduction

This project was conceived during a period of post-tenure freedom and mid-life academic and personal questioning. I had recently finished a book about Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong and was looking for a new project, one that would allow me to follow up on intellectual issues that were not fully explored in my earlier work and that fit with my practical concerns. I was interested in globalization and transnationalism—as opposed to unidirectional approaches to migration—and in ideas about the intersections of political economy with everyday lives. My interest in gender, sexuality, love, and romance in cross-cultural perspective joined with a newfound interest in marriage, kinship, and the family. As an academic, I had come to question the place of anthropology in a postcolonial world, and I was increasingly attracted to what anthropologists have called “feminist ethnography.”

On a practical level, I was at a stage of my life when it was not feasible to undertake prolonged stints of field research that would interrupt my children’s schooling, nor did I desire to spend long periods of time away from home. A project with a “local” component would suit both my pragmatic and my intellectual concerns. As an anthropologist, I wanted a project that would lend itself to an analysis of transnational flows and exchanges of people and ideas, one that would allow for a critique of binary constructions of “them” and “us,” allowing me to contribute to a critique of anthropological representations of our subjects as ethnographic or cultural others. As a feminist of sorts, with certain leanings toward postmodernism as well as a critical appreciation of political economy, I sought a project that would allow me to question the limits of my commitment to feminism, to further explore relations of gender and power within a context of migration and shifting global boundaries. Unwilling to give up ethnographic research, a

cornerstone of anthropology with certain advantages over more purely discursive cultural studies, I aimed to design a project through which I could explore gender, transnationalism, and globalization, and also raise issues of epistemology, methodology, and ethnographic writing.

When I began this project, I was not fully aware of the problems inherent in the terms “mail-order brides” or “mail-order marriages,” and I was unaware that many people who are—or whose marriages are—labeled as such take offense at the terms (often for good reason). In the course of my research on domestic workers, I was struck by the number of Filipina overseas contract workers (OCWs) I met in Hong Kong who wrote to pen pals abroad. Most of them had met their pen pals through magazines and agencies, or through friends who passed on the names and addresses of men whose letters they had received, but most had yet to meet their pen pals in person. They harbored hopes of meeting face-to-face and, if all went well, imagined marrying and going to live abroad. At the time, I took note of this phenomenon but paid little close attention. In 1998, my interest took a more serious turn. I had agreed to talk about *Maid to Order in Hong Kong* at a local Borders bookstore, and at the end of the talk I met “Ben.”

A tall man with blue jeans and long hair, in his early fifties, Ben would not have been out of place at a Berkeley bookstore, but he stood out in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. A law professor with a remarkably open attitude toward anthropological research, he introduced himself as someone who had just become engaged to a Filipina whom he had met by way of a pen pal introduction service. After a brief conversation, Ben readily agreed to be interviewed. Like many anthropological “key informants,” he became an important entrée for me into the community of Filipino-American couples and into both the real and the virtual communities of men and women who have met and courted via correspondence.

In some ways Ben fit the popular stereotype of men who pursue relationships with women abroad: he had been married and divorced twice, he was middle-aged, and although outgoing, he did not feel comfortable meeting women at bars and parties. In other ways, he did not fit the image of “losers and sociopaths” who are rumored to pursue this route to finding a wife. He was a highly articulate and insightful, educated professional; his politics were in many ways left-leaning; he considered himself a feminist of sorts or was at least sympathetic to certain feminist concerns, and he was not unattractive. Why would Ben (and tens of thousands of U.S. men), I wondered, decide to subscribe to a magazine or an Internet agency and write to women thousands of miles away in the hopes of finding a spouse? Were there reasons—besides the stereotypical issues of poverty and des-

peration—why a young, attractive woman like Rosie would write to Ben, a man twenty-five years her senior, and in the course of their first face-to-face meeting, agree to marry him? The answers I found, in their case as in others, were not always—or not simply—the expected ones.

Throughout the 1990s, the number of Filipinas listed by recruitment agencies has continued to grow, despite passage of Republic Act 6955 in the Philippines in 1990, which prohibits recruitment of Filipinas for marriage to foreign nationals. Filipinas, followed by Eastern European women and women from the former Soviet Union, are the most numerous nationalities listed by introduction agencies. By the 1990s, Chinese women from the People's Republic of China (PRC) were also drawing the attention of pen pal services and U.S. men in search of foreign marriage partners, and their numbers continue to increase. I thus began to design a multisited research project that focused on the experiences and perspectives of Chinese and Filipino women and men from the United States. The research included more conventional anthropological interviews, participant observation, and face-to-face encounters in China, the Philippines, and the United States, and also a less conventional component of virtual ethnography—fieldwork from my computer—in the electronic, mass-mediated community of those involved in global correspondence relationships.

For about three years, beginning in 1998, from my home or university computer in Pittsburgh, as well as from the University of Hong Kong library and at cyber-café in Hong Kong, Beijing, Manila, Cebu, and Butuan, I communicated via the Internet with several hundred men and women who were involved in correspondence relationships. I initially contacted about forty women from China and forty from the Philippines through one of over 350 marriage-oriented introduction agencies listed on the Internet. Many of these women I met and got to know in person in 1999 and 2000. Others were introduced to me by their friends or partners. I was granted permission as a researcher to join four private lists whose members were mainly men with Filipina or Chinese wives, fiancées, or girlfriends. As a subscriber to these lists, I met several hundred men. I got to know about thirty men through repeated communications, including private e-mails; about twenty others, like Ben, I met and got to know in person. In the course of my research I followed private chats and news groups, studied on-line introduction services, examined personal web pages and photographs, and communicated through the Internet. At the peak of the research, I received over a hundred e-mail messages a day and communicated with men and women from all over the United States and from different regions of China and the Philippines.

Although meeting marriage partners from abroad is not new, the Internet has fueled a global imagination and created a time-space compression that has greatly increased the scope and efficiency of introductions and communication between men and women from different parts of the world. As such, it is integrally associated with transnationalism and globalization, and presents many new challenges for ethnographic research. One problem I faced, for example, was knowing when to stop. In contrast to anthropological field research in a faraway place that is bounded in time and space and has a more definite beginning (when one steps off the plane) and end (when one says good-bye and returns home), virtual ethnography enters one's home and office, blurs the boundaries between here and there, and threatens to draw in the researcher in such a way that she risks going native in virtual space, neglecting the ultimate task of writing.

The topic of correspondence courtship and marriage between U.S. men and Filipinas or Chinese women has allowed me to address questions about gender and power in ways that my prior research on domestic workers did not. Although most reviewers recognized my work on Filipina domestic workers as a feminist study—one that deals with the subtle articulations of gender, class, nationality, and power—one reviewer suggested that I had not fully utilized feminist theory. Another commented that I had focused almost exclusively on the perspectives of the workers, but had (admittedly) not represented employers in such a comprehensive manner. In formulating this study, I could not ignore feminism for two main reasons. First, any analysis of correspondence courtship involving western men and foreign women would require that I grapple with feminist and popular ideas about universal gender inequality, the “traffic in women,” and marriage as an oppressive patriarchal institution. Among the most common, yet problematic, of various feminist perspectives on the issue of correspondence marriages are those that assume “mail-order brides” to be a singularly oppressed category of victimized women who are “trafficked” and in need of rescue. Second, to many men “the western feminist” (often characterized as a singular type with a single perspective) represented the antithesis of the Asian women they are courting. Western feminists—and the putative damage they have done to the western family and gender roles—were often cited by men as one of the factors that motivated them to look for a foreign spouse. Thus I analyze both men's critical, often hostile, views of feminists and feminism, and also feminists' critiques of correspondence relationships.

Contemporary feminist theories provided tools with which to understand international correspondence relationships. Rather than focus on

women and universal female subordination, contemporary feminist concerns lie in understanding gendered heterogeneity and differences that are complicated by class, nationality, race, and so on. Rather than view women as simply dominated by men, attention is paid to more complex and subtle articulations of power, as well as to the way in which institutions and processes (such as immigration and citizenship) may be engendered. Power, in other words, is not something men “have” and women do not. The more I learned about correspondence relationships, the more inadequate binary notions of “women’s oppression” or “male domination” seemed, and the more important contemporary feminist concerns with power, ideology, representation, and positionality became.

As with my focus on domestic workers, in which I justified my relative omission of employers’ perspectives on the basis that domestic workers were the ones whose voices were often unheard, I was tempted to focus exclusively on the views of Filipinas and Chinese women and to ignore the men except as they were represented by women. Women who are labeled “mail-order brides” appeared to me to be less fairly represented, less well understood, and at a disadvantage in having their voices and their perspectives heard compared to the men. Often women are spoken for or about, but their own perspectives are difficult to discern. ABS-CBN News, a Filipino online news web site discussed in chapter 2, describes “the typical Filipina mail order bride” as one who “believes that marrying a foreigner is her ticket out of poverty.” Such marriages may “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.”<sup>1</sup> The “mail order bride industry” is often depicted as “a microcosm of the larger international sex industry.”<sup>2</sup> Women are often portrayed (in contrast to the ABS-CBN quotation above) not as making an active choice, but as passive pawns in a larger game that denies them agency. Women are said to have no choice but to “sell themselves” as brides: “Amidst poverty and oppression, the promise of the good life as touted by the matchmakers and reports of ‘success’ by friends who opted for life outside the Philippines have influenced, even forced, women to seek future mates through the mail. They see Americans as their ‘knights in shining armor’ who will snatch them away from their life of poverty and oppression.”<sup>3</sup> Given such simplistic depictions of women and their motivations, it was tempting to focus solely on their side of the picture. I thought it would be easier to empathize with them, and render them more understandable and sympathetic, than with the men. One of my main objectives was to explore ways in

which women made informed, logical choices from an array of available yet structurally limited options.

It would have been easier to avoid the men, except as seen through the eyes of women. One could argue that there is less need to present the men's side of the picture, and that it would be difficult to maintain sufficient objectivity in representing them. Yet this is not the case. Men and their perspectives, I learned, are—like the women—often misunderstood or glossed in stark and stereotypical terms. Men are depicted, for example, as “buying” brides, as wanting women they can control and exert power over; they are said to want women who are subservient, submissive combinations of sex slave and domestic servant.<sup>4</sup> Among the best known images of men who met their spouses through correspondence are those who have received significant media coverage, for example Terry Nichols (convicted in the Oklahoma City bombing) and Timothy Blackwell (who shot and killed his estranged Filipina wife and two of her friends in a Seattle courtroom). Yet these cases, as well as less famous ones designed to shock and titillate on the talk show circuits, are far from representative. Heeding the old but important critique that gender studies should not focus exclusively on women, and that gender involves ideologies, roles, and relations, I decided to include men as an integral and necessary part of this study.

To try to understand and be fair to the men and their perspectives posed at times a serious challenge. The suspicion and overt hostility that some men directed toward me and my research, their derogatory views of western women, their demeaning images of foreign women, and the occasional cases that seemed to fit the worst stereotypes were sometimes difficult to stomach. Some men I met in person were not, to my mind, at all likable. Yet there were also many pleasant surprises. Some men welcomed an effort to “set the balance straight” about them and their relationships and were extremely open and helpful. Many put aside their preconceptions about me, overlooked my intrusions into their lives, introduced me to their wives, told me their life stories, and shared personal details about their relationships. The questions they posed about my research and my accountability were more challenging than any academic audience or professional review process I have ever faced.

I have come to see the men involved in correspondence relationships as a very diverse group of people; many are decent and well-intentioned human beings who have learned a great deal in the process of their relationships. Many men, for example, experienced a brief but significant sense of helplessness, loss of independence, and often dependency on their girlfriends or fiancées as they traveled outside the United States (often for the

first time) to meet their pen pals. On Internet discussion groups, such men reminded each other that their own disorientation abroad is just a fraction of what their wives are likely to encounter in the United States. When one man expressed relief upon returning to the United States, another urged him to remember these feelings when his “loved one” is lonely or homesick in America. Some men demonstrated strong interest in learning about their partner’s culture; a few explored possibilities of settling abroad. Many went to great lengths to ensure their partner’s comfort and happiness in the United States. Some went so far as to move to a different city or state so that their wives would feel less isolated and would have the support of a local Chinese or Filipino community. As the mostly non-Asian partners of Asian women, some men reflected on their first encounters with racism in the United States and abroad, and many came to question their presumptions about the privileges of race, nationality, and gender in relation to the immigration process. For some, the experience of meeting a foreign partner was accompanied by a greater awareness of and sensitivity to differences and dislocations of various sorts. Others, it seemed, were far more callous or naive in their expectations, and their desires for and presumptions about masculine power and authority remained intact.

One problem with including men’s perspectives is that they risk becoming dominant, taking over the text. When men spoke about their experiences and those of their partners, they often did so in authoritative voices. Many claimed to speak for the women they knew. Men often signed their e-mail messages to me and to the list as a couple, although the messages were often just from the men. Aware of this risk, I have struggled to balance it in the research by addressing women in private, away from their partners as much as possible, and in my writing by treating men’s and women’s voices as multiple. Just as there is no one woman’s experience, men’s perspectives and experiences are also varied.

Although I aim to be fair to people in this study, certain biases are inevitable. I have chosen to focus mainly on the less-known, more common, yet less sensationalist side of correspondence marriages. What many people “know” about “mail-order marriages” are the stories—such as those of Timothy and Susana Blackwell—that are publicized because they involve murder, violence, or domestic abuse, or the sensationalist cases of teenage women who speak no English and serve as maids and sexual partners for elderly men who end up on the popular talk show circuit, or wives who are suspected of marrying their husbands to acquire a green card.<sup>5</sup> Such stories are well-known, important, and sometimes heart-breaking, but they are hardly representative, nor are they unbiased in their presentation.<sup>6</sup>

There is another, little-known but much more common, side of the picture. It involves less intrigue, and less sex and violence. It involves more of the everyday challenges that take on new meaning when lives are transplanted to another part of the world; more of the challenges of dealing with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and its masses of paperwork and bureaucratic red tape; more of the challenges of getting to know someone at a distance and learning to deal with his or her flaws and imperfections face-to-face; and more of the challenges of waiting for months, sometimes years, before a fiancée can come to the United States or a married couple can live together. Once in the United States, for women, it involves adjustments to things that appear minor to many Americans, yet are in fact highly significant, such as where to buy the “right” kind of rice or fresh fish, streets and neighborhoods that seem abnormally quiet and unfriendly, a new schedule that may include remaining at home alone for most of the day. A woman’s sense of loneliness and dependency on her husband may last for varying periods of time, depending on a wide array of factors. The frustrations, necessary patience, and high degree of commitment that is necessary to see this process through are among the issues that these couples face. It is this less-known, more mundane side of the phenomenon that I aim to convey. As one U.S. man married to a Filipina wrote on an online news chat forum, “We only read about the abusive situations and the men who take advantage of their foreign wives because stories like Nathan’s and mine . . . and the Fil-Am couples that I know in the United States who have loving relationships \*don’t\* \*sell\* \*newspapers\*!!! How about this for a headline: ‘MAN LOVES WIFE HE MET THROUGH A PEN-PAL AGENCY, TRIES HARD TO TREAT HER RIGHT.’ Yawn.”<sup>7</sup> It is my hope that, in contrast to the popular media, scholarly books are of interest despite a lack of sensationalism. As I explained to members of an Internet chat group, scholarly studies have less pressure to sensationalize and can therefore potentially reveal the problems and inaccuracies of popular representations.

Besides looking at the wider historical and political-economic context in which such relationships are imagined and experienced, I stress that this study focuses primarily on the views and experiences of Chinese and Filipino women and U.S. men who are contemplating correspondence, in the process of correspondence, recently married, or about to be reunited. I do not examine marriages in the United States in any detail. This book ends where the stories of these couples’ marriages begin.<sup>8</sup>

There are some costs to my approach, and I anticipate criticisms from different sides. I have no doubt that whatever I write, some of the men will



feel seriously maligned. For some of them, this book will represent yet another feminist study by a researcher who has betrayed their trust by not painting them all in glowing colors. Others may be disappointed that this is not a quantitative, empirical study that scientifically “proves” that their motives are good and their marriages more likely to succeed, or that provides them with a list of useful tips on how to make their marriages work. Some participants in this research had an exaggerated notion of the power of one ethnographer. As one man wrote (I paraphrase): “I hope your work will help convince the world that we are not a bunch of weirdos and losers and that these marriages are happier and more successful than others.” Aside from his distorted impression of the audience for an academic monograph, happiness and success are difficult to measure.

From a very different vantage point, others have questioned the need to speak for the men involved in these relationships, since they are commonly assumed to have the power to speak for themselves. As mentioned above, however, that is not entirely true. Were it true, I would not continue to encounter the same tired stereotypes of men (and women) in feminist, scholarly, and popular work. Although men may indeed—largely by virtue of education and class privilege—have greater opportunities to air their views, especially on the Internet, their opinions do not circulate far into the larger public, and they are left, as one man put it, “preaching to the church choir.” Just as women I met do not fit the image of “mail-order brides,” the men do not fit the image of all-powerful, dominant white males. If this study succeeds in its humanistic project of depicting women as something other than mail-order brides, desperate victims, or hyperagents, motivated solely by economic hardship and desperation and willing to marry any western man who approaches them, and if the men (many of them, anyway) can be seen as something other than simply consumers of women as commodities, then this work will have succeeded, at least in part. My aim is to allow the men and women to emerge as a diverse group, with different opinions, experiences, and motivations, and yet to also see them within a particular historical and global context as people who both exert power and are subject to it.

Another criticism I anticipate is that I have elided the more urgent issue of domestic abuse. Immigrant women can be, for very specific reasons, more vulnerable to abuse by their husbands than women who are citizens.<sup>9</sup> By focusing mainly on other issues here, I do not intend to deny the existence of such serious problems. However, a better understanding of the diversity of these relationships should ultimately help to produce more realistic views and legislation and support the creation of fewer bureaucratic

stumbling blocks for U.S.-foreign marriages, fewer obstacles to U.S. immigration, and looser restrictions on citizenship requirements. As Uma Narayan has argued, greater policing of marriages and more bureaucratic red tape for these couples may prevent such marriages, but they will not prevent domestic abuse.<sup>10</sup>

Images of “mail-order brides” as docile victims, reproduced in feminist writing and in the popular media, may inadvertently perpetuate the very images that appeal to men who are more inclined to control or abuse women. If images of Asian women as active agents who will not submit to or tolerate violence were more prevalent, perhaps men who aim to control and abuse women might not so readily look to Asia for spouses. As one man told me, “If other Chinese women are anything like my wife, some of these men who expect Chinese women to be meek and obedient are in for a very rude awakening!” Deconstructing hegemonic images of “mail-order brides” or of men and women who meet through correspondence may not provide a solution to the problem of domestic abuse, but it may constitute one step in that direction.

The persistent negative stereotypes of “mail-order marriages” that have taken root and are perpetuated in many corners of society provide an opportunity for reflection and critique. Why has this topic captured the U.S. popular imagination? What do correspondence relationships say about gender relations in the United States? How is the treatment of this topic symbolic of other societal fears and concerns about race, sexuality, nation, and gender? What are the wider implications of feminist writings that traffic in the same negative images of submissive Asian women that they criticize as demeaning when espoused by introduction services? What is, and what should be, the role of the state in policing transnational marriages and determining their legitimacy? Why are the laws and policies governing immigration and citizenship of foreign children adopted by U.S. citizens so different from those governing foreign spouses of U.S. nationals? How are these relationships indicative of the power relations and disciplinary regimes of transnationalism and globalization? How is political economy linked to the cultural logics of desire?

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Chapter 1 begins with stories of Moira, Netty, Faith, and Bob. Their stories contrast sharply with many popular ideas about “mail-order brides” and with many scholarly studies of “mail-order catalogs.” These sketches begin to illustrate the complex motivations and experiences of “real people” behind the popular stereotypes and (mis)representations of “mail-order

brides." Chapter 2 describes various Internet dimensions of my research and the rich ethnographic potential of virtual ethnography. This chapter also shows how men and women involved in correspondence relationships form an imagined global community that builds on commonalities of gender and nationality, yet also crosses national, ethnic, racial, and class boundaries. In contrast to Arjun Appadurai, who views electronic media as a means of creating imagined communities that stand largely in opposition to nation-states, this chapter considers how the Internet community both traverses and reinforces state boundaries and definitions of citizenship.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 3 examines and criticizes popular images of "mail-order brides" as "trafficked women" and victims. Such representations present a skewed and partial picture that is grounded in older assumptions about gender inequality and marriage that reinforce orientalist stereotypes of Asian women and reduce "mail-order marriages" to a form of capitalist market exchange. Inspired by contemporary feminist ethnography and by feminist writings on sex work and prostitution that are particularly attentive to issues of agency, I propose a critical rethinking of such images alongside other forms of marriage and introduction.

By examining the stories of two Filipino-American couples, chapter 4 draws on, yet further critiques, feminist and cultural studies analyses of "mail-order brides" and catalogs. Two arguments run through this chapter: one is that ethnographic field research can serve as a critique of textual and discursive approaches that overemphasize the sexual dimensions of correspondence courtship and overlook women's agency; another is that the recurring fairy tale motif of a young woman who is rescued by a prince reveals tensions regarding gender, class, and marriage. Overall, I argue that these marriages paradoxically support conservative notions of gender and "family values" while simultaneously opposing conservative views about interracial relationships.

Chapter 5 turns to political economy and cultural logics of love and desire. I argue against a dichotomous or discontinuous view of love and opportunism that treats pragmatic concerns as incompatible with emotional ones. I argue that political economy is not simply a backdrop to such a study, nor is it the determining force in creating correspondence marriages, but that cultural notions of love and desire are shaped by political economy.

Chapter 6 grapples further with the issue of women's agency and the expressions of, and also limits to, women's power in relation to concerns about sex and money. This chapter also considers global hypergamy—the assumption that Asian women marry "up"—and asks, "up" in what ways and according to whom? Chinese and U.S. ideas about marriage help to ex-

plain the asymmetry of gendered geography of global hypergamy, and the “humor” surrounding the topic of relationships between Asian men and western women.

Chapter 7 places contemporary Chinese and Filipina brides and correspondence relationships within the wider context of the history of Asian immigration to the United States. Tales of waiting—poignant stories about the trials and tribulations of the immigration process—reflect the inequities of race, nationality, class, and gender in relation to migration and show how U.S. immigration policies police borders and marriages.

The concluding chapter reconsiders the advantages of the concept of transnationalism over the ideas of “trafficking,” migration, and “mail-order marriages,” which imply a unidirectional flow of bodies and ideas across borders. I point to different attitudes and policies regarding the immigration and citizenship of Asian adoptees and Asian brides. Such differences illustrate inequalities in the immigration process, and also the complex and contradictory ways in which migration is linked to ideas about sexuality, marriage, and family.