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of the Transnational Community
Communicated through the Mail-
Order Bride Industry

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Abstract

The clichéd notion that the United States of America is the power of authority has long been criticized by theorists. However, in such critical analyses, the gendered authority exerted by America is rarely discussed. The patriarchal presence that is continuously encouraged in mainstream culture can be traced to the center of this power of authority. This paper intends to examine how such an emphasis on American power was created and how this image is being communicated to the international community through the lucrative mail-order bride industry. In particular, this paper will analyze how the mail-order bride trade sets to profit from the Third World woman’s culturally imperialistic vision of America while catering to the needs of the patriarchal First World male. In examining the mail-order bride industry’s reliance on the theme of nostalgia, it will be shown that a profitable market has emerged as a result of catering to a culture that prioritizes the patriarchal male individual, rather than those deemed as minorities in today’s western society.

KEYWORDS: Transnational communication, mail-order bride industry, culture shift, third world women, gender studies, the foreign female, otherness, the American marriage, the profit of power

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Introduction

“I like to be in America! O.K by me in America! Ev’rything free in America! For a small fee in America!” (*West Side Story*). With the constant barrage of films, music and books touting the American dream, images of the quintessential American utopia have become a clichéd picture sold worldwide. The promise of health, wealth and prosperity in the land of the free has been played out in enough narratives to make any international visitor want to pack up and move in with the Cleavers:

A utopian belief in the hope of a better world, and a better society, has been present in popular culture throughout the twentieth century...alongside the many texts that fawn on power and wealth, in the shape of glamorous portrayals of the rich and influential, there is also evidence of radical skepticism about the claims of the powerful, and a questioning of authority (Hesmondhalgh, 2002:241).

In such narratives, the power of authority that is being represented is heavily gendered. The patriarchal presence that is continuously encouraged in mainstream culture has enduringly remained the protagonist in the narrative of “America: The King of the World”, the First World plot line where capitalism, corruption, and Coca-Cola reign above all. This brings into question how such an emphasis on American power was created and how this image is communicated to international communities. One manner in which this narrative is fostered revolves around an international industry that profits from cultural transactions that produce fairy-tale realities for those of different backgrounds, thus seeming to bridge cultures together. It is a business of cultural reproduction that is based on the age-old paradigm of the patriarchal male colonizing the exotic female other. Fulfilling this image is the mail-order bride industry: an industry that profits from Third World women’s culturally imperialistic vision of America while catering to the desires of patriarchal First World males. The American cultural image that has constantly been viewed as the standard of highest living lies at the heart of this industry. The mail-order bride trade has succeeded for decades as a result of catering to a culture that prioritizes the patriarchal male individual, rather than those in minority positions in society. Minority women in particular become products to be purchased by the patriarchal male consumer; Tolentino summarizes that “advertised mostly for middle-class, elderly white men, mail-order brides embody the hyper real shopping for the First World male and the hyper real commodification of women and the Third World” (1996:1).

While some theorists, such as Nicole Constable, Rubin Gayle, and Robert Scholes have argued that the mail-order bride industry encourages the amalgamation of cultures, it is also important to examine how such a profitable industry manages to create and sustain an image that encourages the selling of the body as a means to an end. The manner in which such a controversial trade prospers is

a result of the ways in which communication is used within the mail-order bride industry. In examining Appadurai's article, "Disjuncture and Difference", the author examines how in today's transnational society there exists an amalgamation of cultures; "the relationship among five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) *ethnoscapes*, (b) *mediascapes*, (c) *technoscapes*, (d) *financescapes*, and (e) *ideoscapes*" (33). In examining how these imaginary landscapes affect the global flow of culture, Appadurai notes that it is interesting to examine how within such landscapes, the theme of nostalgia fuels this cultural trend. As he states, "this is one of the central ironies of the politics of global cultural flows [...] it plays havoc with the hegemony of Eurochronology [...] in the peculiar chronicities of late capitalism, pastiche and nostalgia are central modes of image production and reception" (1996:33).

With American cultural imperialism thriving via its adoption in countries around the world, the creation of nostalgic identification on a global scale is what has allowed America to become one of the most powerful cultural players on today's global stage. As such, the mail-order bride industry thrives on creating nostalgia. The trade accomplishes this in three distinct manners. First, it attempts to fulfill the seductive fantasy that life in First World nations, like the United States and Canada, is as privileged and perfect as its utopian representations in popular culture. This phenomenon can be associated with Appadurai's notion of the ideoscape, in that they "consist of a chain of ideas, terms and images, including freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation, and the master term, democracy" (1996:36).

Furthermore, the industry relies on the use of the medium of cataloguing. The cataloguing of women instills power to the hands of the patriarchal male. Appadurai's definition of mediascapes helps to explain this phenomenon: "[mediascapes] tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements out of which scripts can be formed of imagine lives" (1996:35). Finally, the mail-order bride industry uses traditional forms of romantic representation of courtship through the use of mail correspondence as opposed to e-mail. This is considered to be an example of a technoscape, whereby the technology of mail-correspondence moves across boundaries that might not have been previously traveled; "technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previous impervious boundaries" (Appadurai, 1996:34). In using these three strategic approaches to cultivate an apparently seamless relationship building trade, the mail-order bride industry has become a market that thrives on nostalgic images and themes of bygone days, where perfection can be achieved within the confines of a white picket fenced reality.

A Nostalgic Colonization - Where Women Fit in

In Simone de Beauvoir's 1953 text, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, her central thesis is that women have been forced to occupy a place in society that is secondary to men:

a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men (1953:9)

De Beauvoir's thesis is complementary to the principal ideology of the mail-order bride industry. As a result of the manner in which the business is structured, the patriarchal male purchases the wife that best fits his desires – desires of social and sexual domination that have been established for centuries. "The mail-order bride functions as a commodity embodying the recently outdated First

World narratives of the nuclear family and coloniality [...] the Third World woman assumes the domestic and sexual tasks vacated by emancipated white women” (Tolentino, 1996:66). While Tolentino argues that today’s mail-order bride is merely filling the high heels of the First World woman reclaiming her role outside of the domestic sphere, it is interesting to note that the industry continues to thrive on the nostalgic images of decades gone by.

One of the main features that has helped shape the mail-order bride industry as a business of cultural reproduction is the historical discourse that has encouraged the theme of patriarchal colonization which continues to prosper today. From the moment that John Smith swept Pocahontas off her feet and brought her back from the New World, the notion of women as cultural beings needing to be rescued is a historical trope that has defined the status and power of the patriarchal male. Michel Foucault popularized the term discourse in order to explain how meaning is created with regard to specific words or images, defining it as “the rules and practices that produce meaningful statements and regulate what can be spoken in different historical periods [...] a group of statements which provide a means for talking about (and a way of representing knowledge about) a particular topic at a particular historical time” (1979:25). It is historical discourse that has positioned women as being inferior to men, encouraging the patriarchal male in today’s society to instill cultural imperialist values in the international community. With women being viewed as submissive, they are the ideal conquest of colonization for the First World male. However, with the modern, empowered woman being seen as a threat to masculinity, many men yearn to return to the historically-defined bygone days where men still held the upper hand:

The mail-order bride business hinges on this passive characterization of women, the very antithesis of the supposedly liberated First World woman [...] the white women’s movements have created a backlash for which patriarchy is taking issue in justifying its conquest of Third-World women [...] the mail-order bride catalogue is the emasculated man’s guide to redeeming his self-worth, which has been lost in his own colonization within the postmodern [...] masculinity seeks to conserve its own destabilization by envisioning a past, present, and future that align women, domesticity, and spirituality on the one hand, and men, work, and materiality on the other (Tolentino, 1996:71).

With this in mind, the defining historical mind frame that put men at the forefront of power is still encouraged today and will continue to prosper as long as the white patriarchal male aligns his yearning for gendered domination in the form of a business contract. As Tolentino surmises, “nostalgia places the bodies of women within organic fantasy narratives of family and colonial glories “(1996:72). The colonizer will forever be colonizing until his needs are met.

Creating the Canvas: The Aesthetic Representation of Women in Art

In Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright’s article, “Spectatorship, Power and Knowledge”, they hail the world of art as being one of the most powerful forms of conveying cultural power (2001:80). To them, the discourse of the painted world helps establish the power relations that exist between men and women based on who is viewing the canvas and who is displayed on the canvas:

In the history of art, the fact that paintings were geared towards male viewers had as much to do with the commerce of art as it did with the social roles and sexual stereotypes of men and women. Until quite recently, most collectors of art were men and the primary viewing audience of art was men [...] the image convention of depicting women as objects of the gaze and men as lookers continues to exist today...in the classic Western tradition of images, which was dominant throughout the history of painting, men were depicted in action and women as objects to be looked at [...] men act, women appear (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001:80-81).

Consequently, as a result of nineteenth century artistic masterpieces such as Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot* (see Appendix 1), and Jean Léon Gérôme's *Pygmalion and Galatea* (see Appendix 2), the stereotype of men possessing power over the female body has had years to develop and has become one of the more predominant ideologies in today's modern society. However, while it is very common to state that men are superior to women in terms of the power granted to them through their representation in today's media, it is important to examine how historically the foreign female has emerged as a token desire; "the discourse of mail-order brides is situated in the historical positioning of female bodies into a transnational space inscribed in colonial, militarist, and capitalist histories" (Tolentino, 1996:48). Returning to Sturken and Cartwright's example of the ability of the world of art to translate cultural norms to the masses, the artwork of French painter Paul Gauguin (see Appendix 3) is seen by many as providing the initial representations of the foreign female in the mid-nineteenth century:

The women in Gauguin's paintings are specifically coded as other, in particular as exotic other who represent a world supposedly unspoiled by modern civilization, a paradise [...] These images operate within the binary opposition of civilization/nature, white/other, and male/female, establishing the women in them as exotic, different, and other to both the painter and the viewer (2001:102).

The binary opposition to which Sturken and Cartwright refer has helped establish and encourage the underlying ideologies that not only continue to abound today, but are also made profitable by trades such as the mail-order bride industry.

In examining history's patriarchal representation of developed countries, such as the United States, it is important to examine how mail-order brides, primarily foreign women, have internalized a utopian view of American life. It is a manner of living that they are seduced into believing is desirable, as a result of "the various circuits of postmodern 'love connections' – for example, television dating shows, phone sex, phone dating, and Internet sex – link the discourse to American popular culture" (Tolentino, 1996:51). The notion that many of the mail-order brides marry First World men in order to create better lives for themselves has been termed, 'global hypergamy' by researcher Nicole Constable, who states that "mail-order brides pursue, for lack of better option, the promise of making concrete the cultural standards of middle-class living" (Tolentino, 1996:60). Constable sees this 'marrying up' trend as creating the global pattern between purchaser and purchased – a trend that helps differentiate between the haves and have-nots in today's global society:

It is global in that it involves men and women from different regions. It is hypergamous – building on the conventional anthropological definition of 'hypergamy' as women marrying up into a higher socioeconomic group...it begs the question of how, for whom, and in what sense such marriages represent upward mobility (2003:10).

Constable's notion of global hypergamy can also be examined in terms of how the female bodies of mail-order brides are viewed as a mobile means of advancement in transnational space. Mail order brides recognize that they will not become prosperous within their birth nation and therefore seek alternative international spaces where their bodies can be put to use in order to prosper; in doing so, "the body is resignified by being commodified in an exchange for the signs of material affluence" (Tolentino, 1996:60). Thus, these women are creating a migration strategy that crosses international borders in order to seek a better life.

From Moscow to Manhattan: Maintaining Cultural Imperialism as an Ideological Weapon

A culture that has become closely associated over the years with this trade is the Russian mail-order bride industry, which has emerged as one of the country's most profitable international industries. As a result of years of tumultuous Russian and American foreign relations, it was inevitable that American cultural practices would cross international waters and seep into the Russian identity. Cultural studies scholar Matthew Fraser refers to the influence of cultural practices and images as soft power, or non-military means that have helped Americans exert their international domination over foreign countries without engaging in war; he states that "American hard power is necessary to maintain global stability. American soft power – movies, pop music, television – spreads, validates and reinforces common norms, values, beliefs and lifestyles. Hard power threatens, soft power seduces" (2003:10).

A soft-power that has come to define the American way of life is the television. Fraser muses that "while television's role as a global purveyor of taste and fashion should not be underestimated, its most controversial role in international affairs has been political" (2003:113). With the emergence of broadcast television, many countries around the world succumbed to the American mode of broadcasting in order to stay afloat in the international community. As a result, countries that were once unaware of the American way of life were now being seduced by it in their living rooms:

Even strong, industrialized nations have been forced to modify their long time stabilized broadcasting services and accept commercial operations [...] the Russians advertised in American newspapers their willingness to accept commercial material over their state owned TV system [...] the change to commercialization confirmed the effectiveness of America-style broadcasting both as a revenue producer and as a highly acceptable form of entertainment and persuasion (Schiller, 1992:39).

Historically, with the Russian market willing to be accessible to American televised influence, it is no coincidence that the majority of mail-order brides who have entered the United States have been of Russian descent (see Appendix 4). This is largely because "America was a prosperous and confident nation that saw itself as the leader of the free world. In contrast, the dull, grey, authoritarian Soviet Union was an impoverished, barren police state" (Fraser, 2003:115). As a result of the historical conflict between the Americans and the Soviets, Russian mail-order brides turned to the hope and promise allegedly offered by the United States; "the Cold War thus gave television a timely function as an ideological weapon to promote American values" (Fraser, 2003:115).

Cultural imperialism tends to be accomplished through distinct and often carefully constructed modes of communication. From Mickey Mouse to Microsoft to Mount Rushmore, the influence of American cultural domination over other countries is a result of the format in which culture is produced. Daniel Lerner, a political science professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, isolated the phenomenon of one dominant culture influencing cultures around the world, terming it 'the modernization theory' (Thussu, 2000:56). Lerner believed that the exposure of First World technological inventions to Third World countries would help spread a modern standard of living.

"Modernization theory arose from the notion that international mass communication could be used to spread the message of modernity and transfer the economic and political models of the West to the newly independent countries South [...] based on the belief that the mass media would help transform traditional societies" (Thussu, 2000:56). Lerner's 1958 modernization theory (Thussu, 2000:57) can be used to examine how, within the mail order bride industry, technology is used both as an adherent and deterrent for those involved in the process. The brides waiting to be shipped to a First World country to start their new lives dream about the fairytale reality that they have been exposed to through television, music, and movies from the United States, as "cinema was born –

circa 1900 – at precisely the moment America was emerging as a major power on the world stage. And it did not take long for motion pictures to become a myth-making extension of America's global ambitions" (Fraser, 2003:35). On the other hand, the men who are luring the women across the ocean maintain their anonymity within First World society through an untraceable form of communication - sending letters in the mail. Instead of relying on the timely, yet often highly monitored use of emails, the majority of men who purchase mail-order brides secure the transaction through letter writing. Ironically, the technology that sells the American way of life is not used in creating it.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Packaging International Romance

A testimony written by a Russian mail-order bride applicant reads: "I appreciate their kindness when they write long letters, telling me about himself, his job, his family, and the American way of life" (Constable 2003:33). With the internet perpetually gaining force as one of the most commonly used methods of communication in modern society, it is interesting to note how correspondence in the mail-order bride industry relies on the traditional format of letter writing instead of on-line correspondence. This romantic form of correspondence helps create the nostalgic feel of courtship, thus typifying the traditional ideology of marriage that the patriarchal male seeks; "the Third World woman as commodity is made to embody this nostalgia for previous technology [...] she functions in relation to modernity's fascination with obsolescence in the way she is made to represent its ethos of a copy of the First World's past" (Tolentino, 1996:65). It is ironic to note that while the mail-order brides enjoy the process of letter writing, the First World men use it not only as a nostalgic means of communication, but also because it is more confidential than online communication. As many men are ashamed of purchasing mail-order brides, online communication, such as emails and chat rooms, is too risky. "Most men prefer to live their lives in private, not under the critical eye of those who portray them as social rejects who failed in the U.S. marriage market due to physical or emotional unattractiveness" (Constable 2003:45).

Memories that are rejuvenated through the postal system are an essential component in the narrative between sender and receiver. Intimacy that would be created in face-to-face interactions such as dating can take shape in hand-written letters, where both parties involved can begin to form an image of their future suitor according to their own standards. "That the Third World woman is aligned with the previous technology of the postal systems serves to position her with the primitive, placing her in the realm of 'second nature', which separates her from her own historical and cultural positionality" (Tolentino, 1996:65). Through the sanctity of letter-writing, an imagined community is established wherein written communication is the only form of identification and existence. The relationship is able to take shape as a result of its operation beyond national boundaries; "like global ethnoscapes, they [imagined communities] are landscapes of group activity that are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous" (Anderson, 1983:48). As Benedict Anderson's quote indicates, imagined communities thrive on an acultural existence, whereby cultural boundaries that once separated the colonizer from the colonized are dismantled and a model of communication, which some claim is obsolete in today's modern society, is re-worked through the discourse of the written word; "words – whether printed, spoken, or heard – prefigure the body. The body is inscribed in words. Sex is consummated through words that perform the body that performs the words. Not seen, the body is entangled in words that recount not a historical body but a nostalgic body" (Tolentino, 1996:64). With the Third World woman relying on her body as part of a business contract, hand-written letters, which are an extension of her body, help to situate herself in an industry where her physical presence is her *raison d'être*.

With hand-writing being the main source of contact between the First World and the Third World, it is interesting to note how a somewhat primitive form of communication is linking transnational bodies in an imagined space. Communications theorist Marshall McLuhan argues that all mediums of communication are an extension of the body, stating that “all media [...] are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment [...] man remains as unaware of the psychic and social effects of his new technology as a fish of the water it swims in” (McLuhan and Zingrone, 1969:19). Within the mail-order bride industry, the body’s extension of hand-written letters transforms the manner in which international barriers are broken down between two individuals whose sole connection to each other is through the printed word, exchanging letters loaded with disparate backgrounds and cultural expectations.

Take Your Pick: The Cultural Catalogue of Courtship

Along with anticipating love letters in the mail and reading about promises for a new future, mail-order brides first must be chosen to be considered for courtship. By encouraging nostalgia amongst male consumers, mail-order bride companies create a unique medium of communication between consumer and product. Through the use of catalogues, mail-order brides appear before their potential suitors in the form of a headshot and a demographic, thus further encouraging the notion of the ideal commodity.

For the men, the catalogues provide a listing of available mail-order brides, itemized descriptions of these women, agency services, and procedures for establishing correspondence and arranging marriage. For the women, however, catalogues package women’s bodies, representing these through certain conventions (Tolentino, 1996:66).

In reading any given mail-order bride profile, the potential husband would be introduced to a woman between the ages of 21 and 45, usually college-educated, fluent in a foreign language with limited English, and no dependents; “the functional Third World woman’s body is made symptomatic of the ideal First World male nuclear-family narrative” (Tolentino, 1996:67). In addition to such specificities, the woman would have a name that, regardless of its ethnic nature, would be easily pronounceable thereby minimizing her cultural roots and the fear of being considered different (see Appendix 5).

It is also important to note that the layout of the catalogues is strategically organized. Emulating a high school year book or a *Victoria’s Secret* catalogue, the page layouts with the profile pictures reinforce the continuous theme of nostalgia recurring in the mail-order bride industry; “the catalogues are the emasculated man’s guide to redeeming his self-worth, which has been lost in his own colonization with the postmodern” (Tolentino, 1996:72). The images in the catalogue are positioned to be the object of the male’s gaze, yet implicated with vulnerability for the woman. When examining the mail-order bride profiles, lingerie catalogues, and photos of 1950’s housewives, it is apparent the manner in which the women are presented on the page are thematic (see Appendix 6). The pictures emphasize the image of a coquette with cleavage and charisma. They espouse the notion of an ideal femininity that the patriarchal male wants to buy into in order to reclaim power; “catalogues list and package bodies. Like dossiers, these are technologies of surveillance. They [the catalogues] imply a crisis of masculinity in the First World which can be regained in the conquest and rescue of a Third World woman in order to reconstruct the ideal domestic sphere of the First World” (Tolentino, 1996:72). It is through the carefully constructed communication tactics used in the catalogues that the First World man is allowed to believe that in buying a Third World woman, all of his insecurities in the post-modern world will vanish. In turn, the producers of the mail-order bride catalogues are profiting from the insecurities of the consumer. Similar to the influence of fashion and beauty magazines on First World women, mail-order bride catalogues seduce male

consumers into paying for something that American culture deems as being essential – a heterosexual relationship. Ironically, the society that thrives on culturally invading foreign countries is relying on foreign goods to complete its own American dream.

Conclusion: When *Herstory* becomes *History*...

While it has been argued that American popular culture, letter-correspondence and seductive cataloguing techniques have encouraged the success of the mail-order bride industry, it is crucial to understand that one of the industry's main features is its reliance on nostalgia. The picture-perfect image of Mrs. Cleaver waiting for her husband at the front door with a martini and a million dollar smile is both a possible and profitable reality, according to the mail-order bride industry. However, with First-World males purchasing a spouse who is as foreign to the English language as to the American suburb, the image of a voiceless and obedient wife seems to be inevitable. And that is exactly how they are advertised, as an international body ready to be cultured with the swipe of a credit card.

Appendices1

Appendix 1:

Jean-Désiré-Gustave Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot* (1866).

Appendix 2:

Images taken from Sturken and Cartwright; 72-108

Jean Léon Gérôme's *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1851)

Appendix 3:

Paul Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women* (1899).

Appendix 4:

Mail-Order Brides Categorized by Ethnicity

May, 1998

March, 1998

ASIAN

LATIN

MULTI-ETHNIC

SOVIET

TOTAL

38

55

20

24

26

28

69

105

153

202

Note: In mid-March of 1998, when work on this present report began, there were 153 listings in goodwife.com and in early May, less than two months later, there were 202. This list of links breaks down the agencies into four sections, Asian, Latin, Multi-ethnic, and Soviet, based on where most of the women currently reside. As can be seen in the table above, the current rapid growth is due largely to agencies representing women from Russia and the former Soviet Union (Glodava and Onizuka, 98).

Appendix 5:

Mail-Order Bride Catalogue Profiles

² Glodava, Mila and Richard Onizuka. *Mail-Order Brides: Women for Sale*. For Collins, Colorado: Alaken, Inc., 1999.

JULIA Age: 27

Location: Saint Petersburg, Russia Languages: English – limited, Greek – fluent Education: College

Profession: Manager

Marital Status: Single Children: No

Requests to Partner: I would like to meet an intelligent, kind, responsible, giving, communicative and cheerful man of 35-45 years old, preferably from Europe. I don't mind about his children, I want to have common children in the future.

NATALIA Age: 34

Location: Saint Petersburg, Russia Languages: English – limited Education: Secondary

Profession: Hairdresser

Marital Status: Divorced

Children: Daughter, Diana (20/12/96)

Requests to Partner: I am looking for my second half, a man who is 35-50 years old, his height is 165-185 cm; I hope that my future second half loves children, kind, responsible and a person with sense of humor.

Source: VIP International Marriage Agency

Appendix 6:

Relational Texts – Mail-Order Bride, *Victoria's Secret* Model, & 1950's Housewife

Mail-Order Bride from Ukraine, Irena, 31 years old

Victoria Secret Model, Spring Collection 2007

Good Housekeeping Magazine, September 1953

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