Writing Filipina-Australian Bodies: The Discourse on Filipina Brides*

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On 6 May 1995, the Good Weekend section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* printed a 'special report' titled "The Shameful Story of Australia's Serial Husbands" (Barrowclough 1995). Two days earlier listeners to Radio National's 9 AM program "Life Matters" heard about the article when the program's presenter, Geraldine Dogue, interviewed the well known Australian feminist Anne Summers about it. Starting about a decade ago and continuing through the 1980s and into the 1990s, articles written in magazines, journals and newspapers such as the nationally circulated *Weekend Australian Magazine,* or visual texts such as videos and movies, and academic writing all disseminate 'knowledge' about Filipina-Australians constructed by the Filipina brides discourse. Indeed, Filipinas appear to be newsworthy objects to be circulated and consumed by their mainly white Australian readers.[1]

Australians do not only come into contact with the Filipina brides discourse through the print media. I remember eavesdropping, while in a restaurant just over two years ago, when I heard the Filipina brides discourse being circulated amongst a small party of young, white Australians of both sexes. They spoke about a Filipina [-Australian?], apparently not known to any of those present, who had recently become the girlfriend of a mutual male friend. The 'Filipina' who emerged from their conversation was a stereotype: a poor woman determined to escape her poverty striken, 'third-world', homeland through marriage to a white man. And while her beauty was debatable, her parsimonious nature was agreed upon by all those present. On other occasions, Filipinas who marry white Australian men become a part of some conversations I have with my younger sister. She sympathizes with what she believes is the need of *all*

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1996k "MOL's reply", Readers' Page, *ST*, August 2, 1996.

1996l "Illegal Entry, Overstaying: 74 Charged", *ST*, August 4, 1996.

1996m "Youths in unlawful assembly may go to jail", *ST*, August 16, 1996.

1996n "Danger Zones", *ST*, August 23, 1996.

1996o "Fined $1,561,840", *ST*, August 30, 1996.

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Filipinas to escape their poverty through marriage. What she finds sad and depressing, however, is the age and type of men she believes *all* Filipinas marry—old, white, 'beer-bellied' Australians already rejected by women who know them. These stereotypical Filipinas are also discussed *ad infinitum* during small afternoon tea gatherings I have attended most weekends during the past five years.

Concern about the Filipina brides discourse governed my actions in another fashion—it turned me into a flaneur. Why do I call myself a flaneur—that strolling figure who embodies the public experience of modernity in a society constructed by patriarchy?[2] When wandering about a medium sized shopping center (public space) I stopped and watched some white Australian women looking curiously at two Filipina [-Australians?] window-shopping nearby. Unfortunately, I was not close enough to hear the white Australian women's comments, but their gaze seemed to reflect my desire to know—to have knowledge, not so much about those particular Filipina[-Australians?], but Filipina-Australians generally. It is the Australian will-to-know-Filipina-Australians that produces and circulates the news reports which represent Filipina-Australians, the debates these reports instigate, the movies, videos, academic articles and social chit-chat. All of these not only constitute Filipina-Australians in particular ways, but are themselves born of those very same Filipina-Australians they have constructed. These discursive practices produce the imaginary Filipina-Australian I want to write about here.

Ideologies inherent in a network of discourses—such as those on race, immigration, patriarchy, sexuality, and nation—inform the Filipina brides discourse, and are in turn informed by it. The heterogenous texts I intend discussing below comprise complex sites which ceaselessly mark the discursive boundaries of Filipina-Australian bodies. And, frequently, this discursive construction of them is founded on how white women are constituted to behave in an Australian society where patriarchal ideology dominates.

Filipina 'Invasion' of the 'empty' Australian North

In July 1984, in an article in the *Weekend Australian Magazine* which refers specifically to Queensland, the then Queensland Minister for Northern Development, Bob Katter, highlighted the arrival in Australia of Filipina brides, or fiancees, of white Australian men. Filipinas were not only "moving in," but their arrival was "one of the most potentially significant events since the arrival of Captain Cook" (Brown 1984). "For years," Katter points out, the "people of northern Australia have said populate or perish—if we don't occupy our land someone else will." But the presence of Filipina-Australians in northern Australia creates a "Catch-22" situation because, argues Katter, "[t]hat occupation [of land] is now happening" not only with Filipinas but with the "baby-boom" that is "poised to follow" their arrival. Furthermore, Filipina-Australian wives herald a threat to white Australia. Invisible miscegenist reproductive systems will produce 'hybrids', future generations of non-

white, non-western Australian children. What is left unspoken is the fact that Filipina-Australians' reproductive systems are inseparable from their sexuality and, therefore, their desirability by a number of white Australian males. According to Katter, therefore, "we as a nation must very soberly assess" the presence of Filipina-Australians in the north. It is significant that the article, so typical of its genre, concludes with Katter's remarks about the lack of white Australian settlers in the country's north, leaving the white reader uneasy.

Katter's description of what is happening brings to the reader's memory a long held white Australian anxiety—fear of invasion through what is traditionally perceived as an 'empty north'. Such a representation of the north and outback as empty, however, makes Australia's indigenous people invisible in the landscape and history in order to reiterate the myth of the 'empty north'. White Australians' disquiet about an 'empty north' goes back to the latter half of the nineteenth century when white Australians accepted the myth "populate or perish—if we don't occupy our land someone else will" (*Ibid.*).[3] Katter's words fuel white Australian anxieties because they blur the discursive boundaries which separate a white Australia—homogeneous Anglo-Celtic community—and its Others established during debates on nation and race at the end of the nineteenth century, and affirmed in the White Australia Policy legislated in 1901. These debates on nationalism and the nation were reworked in a new racist discourse during the 1980s, as a result of the urgency produced by the Fraser Liberal-National government's redefinition of ethnicity in 1975, which led to the construction of multiculturalism. This discourse's most articulate spokesman, Geoffrey Blainey, criticized the government's policy on Asian immigration through the family-reunion scheme which, he argued, was "a racial-reunion scheme" which would lead to the disintegration of national unity (see de Lepervanche 1989:176-6 and 1991:152-3). And in the 1990s anxieties still surround the construction of an Australian nation and culture and their relationships with Others within: Aborigines and Asians.

Although the Filipina brides discourse awakens white Australian fears about the arrival of their Other, it also produces coterminous boundaries which reaffirm the contemporary structure of Australian society. The discourse constitutes differences between white Australian women and Filipina-Australians through a representation of the Australian landscape west of the Great Dividing Range as a physically harsh land, especially for white Australian women, many of whom "question why their lives should be a sacrifice" when their city sisters have it so much easier (Brown 1984). Yet, apparently, this is not the case for Filipina-Australians who live in the "lonely north Queensland bush" which is "ailing" from a population drift to the "centralized coastal region":

> From places like Bundaberg to Blackall, Mt Isa to Charters Towers and across the vast Gulf and Cape, from the cattletowns to the coast, the population has been boosted by small dark-haired ladies with musical names and downcast

> eyes, and the baby boom is poised to follow *(Ibid.)*.

Indeed, we are told, a "north Queensland agency" has "dealt with 780 Filipino brides in the past 18 months alone" *(Ibid.)*.[4] Positioned in the bush, or on the edge of the large urban areas, discursive Filipina-Australians live on the margins of white Australian society, as does the Filipina dancer character in the movie *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) who lives in an outback town (to which point I shall return at the end of this article). And it is at Coober Pedy (South Australia), "the end of the world," that the author of that special report about Australia's serial husbands and domestic violence opens her narrative (Barrowclough 1995:47). In order to process the 'Filipina bride', the discourse excludes from its produced and constructed knowledges about Filipina-Australians those other existential Filipina-Australians who live in close contact with Australian society, those who dwell where the vast majority of Australians live: urban cities along the eastern seaboard.

When they arrive in Australia, Filipinas are 'sheets of blank paper' to the majority of Australians, waiting to be inscribed.[5] But once they are here, the discourse inscribes these women's bodies through a network of cultural stereotyping, sexism, and racism, which is then informed by those same discursive Filipina-Australians it inscribed in the first place. In the process, the operation of knowledge/power in the discourse marginalizes other knowledges about Filipina-Australians while producing that very reality it claims to be describing. Immigrant Filipinas are constituted as 'subjects' in Australian society, they become 'knowable' to the Australian people. They are talked/gossiped about in restaurants and other public and private places in the cities and towns scattered throughout the country. They are also available for 'public consumption' through the circulation of the discourse in the media, films and other articles about them. While representing Filipina-Australians the Filipina brides discourse simultaneously (re)establishes, (re)affirms and (re)circulates white women's position in white male-dominated Australian society. Needing to achieve difference between Filipina-Australians and white Australian women, the discourse utilizes patriarchal binary logic which constitutes a feminine ideal, and its forms of deviancy, by defining women through their relations with white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity.[6]

By being constituted as 'unenlightened', immigrant Filipinas can then be positioned in opposition to 'knowing' white Australian women with regard to the Australian landscape, as well as 'good wives' under the 'protection' of those white Australian men who take up the challenge of the forbidding Australian bush. These discursive white Australian women are portrayed negatively as non-womanly: aggressive go-getters. Their preference, unlike that of Filipina-Australians, is work and life in public space (with its masculine license to freedom of action), rather than self-restriction to private space (read masculine control), where love of husband and family is all that is supposed to be required to satisfy women. Their actions threaten stable sexual relations by their intrusion into space reserved for males,

thus creating disorder within Australian society. In contrast, Filipina-Australians are represented in the positive category of this particular dichotomy, that is, as submissive, family-oriented, passive, loving wives. And as passive, virginal Filipina-Australian wives who cannot be separated from their ethnic Filipino identities, their Filipina bodies are sites for the fulfillment of their husbands' and other white Australian males' fantasies/desires which the Filipina embodies (see *Sydney Morning Herald* 1980, *Newsweek* 1983, Brown 1984, Preston 1984, Lowe 1988, Morgan 1992, Thomas 1993, Barrowclough 1995:48). These women, therefore, with the "musical names" and "downcast eyes" are to be responsible for the "baby boom poised to follow" their arrival in Australia. In a novel twist, Filipina-Australians are portrayed here as reproductive machines—the nation's new breeders—the role discourses on racism, sexism and patriarchy traditionally reserved for white Australian women (Brown 1984, de Lepervanche 1989). Yet, the discursive production of these two different groups of women has a fluidity that escapes patriarchal control, and contains within itself a sense of chaos, that is, chaos to a patriarchally defined ordered society.

White male myths and binary contradictions

Who speaks in the discourse, for whom and by what authority? Because traditionally women speaking out in white Australian society are seen as contradicting notions of feminity, those who speak are men, not women. Very seldom are Filipina-Australians' voices heard in the discourse. Over and over again, white husbands—represented as married to much younger women—stereotype their Filipina brides, or fiancees as passive subjects who are virtuous, modest virgins prepared to accept male domination (see *Sydney Morning Herald* 1980, *Newsweek* 1983, Brown 1984, Preston 1984, Lowe 1988, Morgan 1992, Thomas 1993, Barrowclough 1995:48). Yet, in contrast to this, there is a long Western tradition in which the East furnishes the site for European male sexual fantasies. As a consequence of the West's sexualizing of the East, the Australian public can buy from newsagents magazines that have titles such as *Hot Asian Babes, Naughty Asian Girls,* and *Horny Oriental Girls,* which mirror other soft pornographic magazines displaying white women such as *Hot'n'Horny.* As well as these magazines, there are pornographic videos easily available for loan or purchase. In this media Filipinas, Filipina-Australians, as well as other Asian women, embody titillating myths of the East/sex for consumption by mainly white Australian men. In these magazines and videos Asian women are the visual expression of one of western society's most ubiquitous myths: all women are natural objects for the eroticized gaze of men.[7] So much so that the image became the reality for one Australian man in Manila. For him historical, individual, subjective Filipinas are stereotyped as "little brown f....ing machines" who live in the "sin city" of Asia [Manila] (Barrowclough 1995:48, Hirst 1985). Although Filipina-Australian wives are represented as virgins, Filipina bodies, in general, are objects of white male sexual knowledges

whose power continually (re)invests these corporeal inscriptions with ever-increasing knowledge/pleasure (see Grosz 1990:64).

From the 1960s to the present white Australian masculinist anxieties about new white feminine assertiveness, cultural, social and political change, and questions surrounding national identity have created a crisis of power for patriarchal Australia. This crisis constitutes an ambivalence about its own authority which is discerned at the intersection of patriarchy, gender, sexuality, race and nation in the Filipina brides discourse. The imaginary Filipina-Australian is the discursive representation of this ambivalence, and is utilized by the discourse to help (re)affirm the traditional role of white Australian women. Consequently, in the discourse Filipina-Australians' bodies not only become the 'reality' of white male fantasies/desires about the sexual East, but are also passive, submissive virginal wives. White women are given agency through images of assertiveness but, in turn, are condemned by the presence of Filipina-Australian wives. And the presence of Filipina-Australians as the embodiment of the myth of a sexualized East constitutes the absence of white women's sexuality from the discourse. Yet, the language used in the discourse is not, and can never be, a substitute for the reality of historical, subjective Filipina-Australians because the relationship between language and reality is highly problematic.

Ambivalence is also discerned throughout the text of Kenneth Morgan's *War of the Sexes,* which "explains HOW to marry a female OR male virgin from overseas,"[8] and (re)iterates and (re)circulates the stereotypes discussed above. Married to a "much younger Filipina" (*Ibid.*:v), the author is caught up in the patriarchal, bourgeois construction of society which emphasizes the importance of virginity and devotion in women, and an aggressive masculinity. In an extremely conservative criticism of white Australian women, and what the author perceives as the influence of feminism on them, he is, nevertheless, thoroughly captivated by Filipinas he represents as virgins—the Other of the white Australian women. So, for example, the male author writes that it is in the Philippines (not Australia) that virginity amongst "girls" aged to 25 and beyond is a "cherished asset" (*Ibid.*:xvii). S/he learns that Filipinas are faithful, demonstrative, "exotic dark eyed, raven-haired" Catholics, with an ability to speak English (*Ibid.*:210). Neither has Morgan escaped the virgin/whore representation of Filipinas in the Filipina brides discourse. Filipinas may be described as virgins by Morgan's male character, but they do attract him sexually: "[I] personally love[s] the hair of these Filipina women, thick and lustrous, and soft and silky to touch" (*Ibid.*:249). Hair, particularly long, loose-flowing hair, is often associated with sexuality in the West. And because he cannot escape Filipina embodiment as the myth of the sexual East, and in a manner reminiscent of the white colonial powers/first world deliverance of 'primitive' peoples/third world, his white male Australian character rescues Filipina dancers from prostitution. Throughout the book, Morgan produces a mutually constitutive relationship between patriarchal, racist and sexist discourses,

and constructs Filipina and white Australian bodies, not only in ways that (re)constitute and (re)confirm power relations between women and men in Australia, but in order to represent Filipina-Australian differences from white Australian women.

The stereotypical Filipina-Australian did not remain unchallenged. In July 1984 the *Weekend Australian Magazine* drew attention to the stereotyping of Filipinas (Brown 1984). But its attempt to challenge the stereotype, like others, is not successful. The article positions the stereotypical portrayal of Filipinas in a box in the center of the article in enlarged, darker print where it will capture the reader's attention even before s/he reads the text: "The stereotype of a lusty little broad[s] sizzling with forbidden Eastern sensuality is offering a shattering disappointment to their husbands." In an attempt to interrogate this sexual stereotype, but caught up in the Filipina brides discourse, one interviewee resorts to the 'positive' side of the dualism virgin/sexual by saying Filipinas "turn naturally to modesty and virginity" because of their Roman Catholic faith. Or, as another example, the same person can state that he is "married to a thankfully not subservient" Filipina.[9] But, in order to question the stereotype by measuring it against the pre-given reality it is supposed to reflect, the interrogator has to construct and define something perceived as 'real' Filipina-Australians in the first place (cf. Neale 1979/80:34-5, Brown 1984).

The representation of Filipina-Australians is as problematic as the relationship between language and reality. Historical Filipina-Australians (like their white Australian husbands or indeed all people) are constituted by the complex nature of their experiences of what are, after all, political constructions not natural categories: race, sex, gender, class, difference and nationality. All peoples' characters, not just those of Filipina-Australians, are fluid and unfixed, while their identity is a multifaceted production that is never completed: always in process and always constituted within representation. Filipina-Australians have many points of similarity with other Filipina-Australians and Filipinas in the Philippines, but there are also deep and significant differences among all of them. Moreover, constructions such as race, class, sex, gender and national identity form boundaries that include and exclude, alter at different times in different circumstances, and are constituted through relations of dominance and subordination. White Australians' desire to know Filipina-Australians is shaped by our own experience of race, sex, class and gender, difference and national identity. In the Filipina brides discourse, these political constructs contain discursive Filipinas so that they do not spill over into a white Australian unknown.

Consequently, discursive Filipina-Australians become 'knowable' through a discourse which constitutes them indiscriminately as brides of white Australian men and portrays them as white Australian women's Other. They are also represented as sexually contradictory. But that is not all the discourse does. For it to retain its authority the discourse must exclude the vast

majority of existential Filipina-Australians who are not male/mail order brides and who resent being stereotyped as Filipina brides (see *Canberra Times* 1990).

Furthermore, the Philippines itself can be comprehended in a particular way through the Filipina brides discourse. In 1984 the then Federal Liberal Party member for the Brisbane seat of Moreton, Don Cameron, referred to Australia as an "Utopia compared with the Philippines." A decade later this one dimensional representation of an eternally impoverished Philippines is still being (re)circulated by the Filipina brides discourse (Brown 1984, *Sydney Morning Herald* 1982, *Newsweek* 1983:43, Lowe 1988, Barrowclough 1995:49). I am not arguing that poverty does not exist in the Philippines. Obviously it does. Nevertheless in the media and in my conversations all Filipina wives come from a poverty stricken background because the Philippines is a third-world country. And to label the nation a 'third world' country ensures that it loses its unfamiliarity: it becomes known because of already existing representations of what it means to be labelled a third-world country, and thus familiar. In the process this does away with any need to qualify the phrase. Indeed, third-world/poor then becomes the reality of the Philippines for those taking part in these conversations. At the same time, all Filipina-Australians disappear as individual historical people only to reappear in the discourse constituted as Filipina brides—women escaping "eternal" poverty in their homeland through access to the wealth of white Australian men.

Furthermore, the employment of a capitalist metaphor by Morgan in *War of the Sexes* enables him to claim that, for the Philippines, Filipinas are their "most valuable export to overseas" (1992:210). As is usual in patriarchal discourse, it is women (Filipinas in this instance) who are produced as signs within the exchange system, not men (white Australian bridegrooms). Through Morgan's unquestioning acceptance of the ideology of patriarchy and choice of capitalist language, Filipinas are caught up in a "political economy of sex" in the text (Rubin 1975). They have an exchange value in the sexual commerce between the Philippines and Australia, and Filipino men and white Australian men. In this manner Morgan is able to (re)produce and (re)affirm the role patriarchal ideology designates women—as submissive to men—in patriarchally dominated Filipino and Australian society.

In according agency to those Filipinas who emigrate, the Filipina brides discourse continues to reveal its anxiety. Filipina bodies are inscribed in binary opposites as poor, passive and submissive, or active (sexually and physically), independent and avaricious women determined to escape a country continually represented as economically backward, in order to live in what white Australians like to think as their 'lucky country'. At different times both Filipina-Australians and their husbands are portrayed as exploiting each other. What the discourse cannot incorporate, however, is the complexity of Filipino emigration to Australia. It excludes people whose existential lives offer sites

of resistance to the stereotypes of the Filipina bride: older parents living in the country, single Filipinas, widowed or separated Filipinas, Filipinas who marry white Australian men after meeting them while on visits here, those sponsored by their relatives already living in Australia and, of course, Filipino men—single, married to a Filipina, or married to a white Australian woman.

Patriarchal discourse and 'unknowable' Australian men

The Filipina brides discourse also constitutes Filipina-Australians through a network of social science, immigration, economic, and statistical discourses. Information constructed through the texts and intertexts which comprise these discourses can be refuted, re-ordered, or added to, by further research in each specific field. Articles published in academic journals and research projects carried out over the past decade handle each other's work in a citationary way. Let it be clear that what I am interested in here is the force of authority given to research on Filipina-Australians and the Filipino community in Australia, through the citation of similar earlier authoritative works. The latest knowledge is not simply cumulative, but a process of erasure, displacement, re-arrangement within the research field which lends it a consensus. References to previous studies on Filipina-Australians nourish current research, while new researchers are guided and influenced by the ideologies and perspectives of preceding scholars. To put it another way, new researchers are ideologically circumscribed by the Filipina brides discourse and their work bound by it (cf. Cooke 1986, Jackson and Flores 1989, Pendlebury 1990, Tan and Davidson 1994).[10]

Here, too, discursive Filipina-Australians are invested with and transversed by relations of power/knowledge. Researchers re-present Filipina-Australians as "subjects" through the 'evidence' gathered from questionnaries. Transfered into sequences of numbers, discursive Filipina-Australians become sources of information represented figuratively on blank pages. Filipina-Australian wives are being continually surveyed in order to be more thoroughly 'understood'. Studies on such topics as the status and role of Filipinas in Philippine society, Filipino values, their educational achievement, Filipina marriages to white Australian men, domestic violence in these marriages, as well as the various studies' inadequacies, are debated as though Filipina-Australians have fixed identities, are unified subjects, and their historical materiality can be captured by the discourse of the studies (see *Ibid.*, see also Watkins 1982, Robinson 1982, Watkins 1983). In these studies Filipina-Australians' identities are abstracted from their historical personalities living in real time and Australian geographical space, and are now located in tables of isolated facts, and restricted to texts. Through research surveillance Filipina-Australian wives apparently become more 'familiar', more 'transparent', and hence assimilable into a niche in Australian knowledge and thus into Australian culture. They then become less of an unknown factor and less of a frightening phenomena in Australian society. Nevertheless they remain simply objects to be counted and constructed discursive 'subjects'. The texts that

comprise these various discourses, however, are not the reality itself. Neither are those Filipina-Australians constituted by the articulators of the discourse, nor even by the challengers to it. After all, the real is nothing but a code of representation which cannot "coincide with the lived" (cf. Minh-ha 1989:94, see also Hutcheon 1988:125-6). Discussions about, and research on, Filipina-Australians do nothing to reject the binary logic of the discourse which opposes Filipinas to white women, Filipina wives to white Australian wives, Filipina marriages to those of white Australians, Philippine culture to Australian culture, and the Philippines to Australia.

The knowledge/power invested in the patriarchal discourse which constructs the correct mode of sexual behavior and roles for women and men in Australian society, becomes the tool through which Filipina-Australians' white husbands constitute their social/sexual identity in the Filipina brides discourse. Through their inscriptions of imaginary Filipina-Australians, these men also speak their own stereotype: conservative, beer-swilling, divorced rednecks over 30 years old, who are out to obtain a young domestic slave. Portrayed at first as the mythical Australian bushman, latterly Filipina-Australians' husbands have been recast as the stereotype of the white violent Australian man (see Brown 1984, de Lepervanche 1989, Barrowclough 1995). Yet, as women, Filipina-Australians are objectified in the discourse, not their husbands. These men are completely silent about their sexuality, their emotions, if not their fantasies and desires. Indeed, even in 1992, the author of *War of the Sexes* still maintained this traditional silence. Discourses, however, are not fixed stable entities but can and do offer points of resistance and opportunities for counter statements to be issued from within the discourse (cf. Foucault 1981:100-1). As early as 1983, a Filipina-Australian voice spoke one of these points of resistance when she stated that one of the "essential issues forgotten in this debate are Australian men and their relationship to women" (Wall 1983).

Sadly, one of the most common representations of Filipina-Australians is as victims of domestic violence (cf. Preston 1984, Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1987 and 1992, Roberts 1987, Lowe 1988, Thomas 1993, Barrowclough 1995, Douge 1995). Indeed, the problem of domestic violence in white Australian society (which is my interest here) is widespread and a national shame. But this is not a recent phenomenon. Documents from the nineteenth century record that domestic violence was widespread and considered natural or even necessary (Lake 1990:7-9). The family is one of the dominant basic social institutions in Australian society, and generally refers to the nuclear family whose ideology is very powerful. This family is heterosexual, hierarchical in structure, with a male head supporting a dependent wife and children with rigidly assigned sex roles. The family, however, is not natural but a constructed concept and highly problematic. On the one hand, white Australian families are a space in which men exercise their presumed right of access to women's bodies, a site of female oppression and as such not safe places for many women. In them many women are at risk from the very men they live with and who

claim to love them. On the other hand, families can, and do, offer shelter and comfort to some women, and mean different things to different women. Because families and family relationships are historical constructs they are not static, but change over time. And, as Filipina-Australians, Filipinas (and other Australian women) are caught up in social power relations which, in the context of the Australian family, are gendered.

In a recent article, the metaphor of a six-pack beer carton from which virginal Filipina brides' bodies are being pulled by a white male hand (Barrowclough 1995:49) is used to visually link the problem of alcohol and violent acts committed against some Filipina-Australians by their white partners. To highlight the dilemma, Filipina-Australian and other voices have broken the public silence that had surrounded the violence committed in some Filipina-Australian marriages. And, in July 1993, while she was in Melbourne, a concerned Corazon Aquino added authority to those voices demanding action on the problem by calling for a national inquiry into the deaths and disappearances of Filipina-Australians (*Townsville Bulletin* 1993, Thomas 1993).[11] But when questions are asked about white Australian men who have allegedly committed acts of domestic violence, and calls made for tighter controls over their actions—their methods of seeking a wife, and/or their gender relationships—the interrogators are faced with obstruction in the form of the rights of the Australian male to privacy in this area and/or silence (Smith and Kaminskas 1992:8, see also Barrowclough 1995). There is no doubt that the Filipina brides discourse stereotypes white Australian males. The problem, however, is not those usually blamed—Filipina-Australians and their agency—but an apparent unwillingness on the part of those who have the authority to do so, to question specific constructions of masculinity in patriarchal Australian society, and the link between these constructions, sexuality and violence. So, for example, Senator Bolkus can assert that he could not limit the number of women a man can marry because that "would be social engineering at its worst." And the Iredale Report (1992), which went some way towards trying to stop serial husbands, found itself incapable of making these men disclose their abuse and assault records and any history of protection orders taken out against them (Barrowclough 1995:51-52). Political power is used here to justify many of the disturbing features of patriarchal power functioning in Australian society.

What the Filipina brides discourse makes invisible, therefore, is the sexuality and emotions of white Australian men, their relationships with themselves, with women, and with other men. What the discourse excludes, and the society seems unable to debate, is how masculinity is constructed and the connection between that masculinity and violence. Also proscribed by the discourse is how the structure of the family, power, and gender relationships interact in the context of Australian social relations. This kind of enquiry is essential because domestic violence against women is a sign of a continuing power struggle for the preservation of the patriarchally constructed heterosexual family dominated by male supremacy (cf.

Breines and Gordon 1975). To what extent, then, has institutional heterosexuality circumscribed force as a natural component of Australian heterosexual relations? After all, violence is a lived experience that creates an awareness of gender in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, Filipina-Australians and Anglo-Celtic Australians are from different racial and cultural backgrounds. Do they, therefore, experience violence dissimilarly? And do class differences indicate that Filipina-Australians experience violence differently among themselves? These questions involve an exploration of the ideologies of Australian racial and sexual discourses, and their reciprocal, constitutive relationship and practices within the society. And will the problem be expressed through the dualist mode of thinking and then become a question of whether the violence committed against Filipina-Australians is more sexist than racist, as if racism and sexism are "competing oppressions" (cf. hooks 1990:62)?

There is no doubt that the situation is very complex. On the one hand, the media, caught up as it is in the Filipina brides discourse, sensationalizes the problem. It continually (re)iterates and (re)circulates the stereotypes of Filipina-Australians discussed above, as well as continually portraying Filipina-Australians as victims of violence. On the other hand, in their attempt to challenge white Australian male sexuality and violence, Filipina-Australians also write their countrywomen's bodies as victims—passive, weak and totally disempowered—hence problems for the society (see, e.g., Barrowclough 1995). Nevertheless, Filipina-Australians can subvert the Filipina brides discourse. As Filipina-Australians they have an insight into areas of female resistances within the power-play of Filipina Australian marriages. To tell of this seems reminiscent of anthropological studies in which the native becomes the colonial informer on his own society to the colonial power. Not so in this instance, because any request by Filipina-Australians and Filipinas for studies into the concepts of power, gender, and family in the context of Australian social relations subverts the idea of the native informer. What is being questioned here is white Australian social and familial relations, not Filipino; white Australian male sexuality, violence and dominance not Filipino men's. By virtue of this, Filipina-Australian voices interrogate sites of difference against which white Australian males, white Australian women, Australian culture, and an Australian identity are measured.

Gender in the outback: 'Priscilla' as a non-subversion

It is my curiosity about Filipinas and Filipina-Australians, as well as my affinity with them as women, that arouses in me a will to know them. But my desire to 'penetrate' the unknown bodies of Filipina-Australians is not above or outside the politics of the specific historical and cultural sites that inform my ideological position as a white Australian woman. My location within patriarchal Australian society, therefore, is ambiguous but fluid. Because my skin is white I operate within the dominant group, albeit inferior to my masculine counterparts. In this position of dominance I am the subject of knowledges about Filipina-Australians which enable

me also to objectify and represent or re-present them in this text. Nevertheless, I cross this boundary because I as a woman, like Filipina-Australians, am also an object of the masculine within the patriarchal structure of Australian society. Therefore, I, too, am positioned as a site of patriarchal desire and pleasure within Australian society. Because I cannot speak from outside my white body, what I can do is take up a critical position in relation to the Filipina brides discourse remembering that I live within, but also against, the same discursive systems and procedures that construct **all** women in Australia in particular ways for public consumption. And as this problematic figure I will conclude with my understanding of the role of the Filipina character in the 1994 Australian movie, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (hereafter *Priscilla*).

Priscilla is a story about a bus trip from Sydney through outback New South Wales (hereafter NSW) and central Australia by three transvestites who perform in towns they pass through on their way to Alice Springs.[12] The movie continually (re)iterates and (re)circulates the stereotypical Filipina-Australian constructed by the Filipina brides discourse. For those who have not seen the film, Cynthia is the imaginary Filipina of the Filipina brides discourse.[13] She lives in outback NSW and is an outsider—a silly woman who serves lemon meringue pie with a meat dish, and offers chocolate crackles (usually reserved for children's parties), to adult male guests of her and her much older white husband. A woman whose sexuality is out of control, she must be locked in her home, because once released she rushes to publicly perform a ribald dance for the entertainment of the men of the town. She manipulates her husband into marriage while he is drunk, and is economically voracious: she leaves her husband in the family car which is filled to overflowing with household goods, and drives towards the empty horizon. Indeed, the movie apparently confers agency on Cynthia by allowing her make the decisions to dance and leave her husband. Yet it continually destroys that agency through its seeming incapacity to escape the stereotype. Unlike other scenes in the movie in which the stereotype is subverted,[14] the Filipina character remains the stereotypical Filipina-Australian bride.

I do not wish to criticize the stereotype here, but to discuss what I see as the significance of the role of the Filipina character in the film. Initially I found *Priscilla* highly entertaining, but became fascinated with it only after I was reminded of the 1965 Freedom Ride.[15] At that time a party of Aborigines and their supporters travelled by bus through outback NSW to highlight the more overt discrimination against Aborigines by white Australians who lived there. Initially I linked this historical event and the fictional one through the buses which were continually on the move through outback NSW. I thought also about the Freedom Ride and *Priscilla* in the broader context of Australian society. Then I realized that the Freedom Ride took place, and *Priscilla* was produced, during times of fluctuating perceptions of what it means to be both Australian and a white woman. For example, controversy about the place of Australia's indigenous people in the wider society never seems to fade, and

their culture remains unacceptable to many white Australians. Debates about immigration (usually meaning Asian) and gender relations ebb and flow, and like the debates about Aborigines they frequently become driven by racist and misogynist ideologies.[16] Consequently the dominant discourses on Australia's national identity make invisible its cultural, gender and racial differences. These discourses continue to control white Australians' desire for a unified national community in the lead up to the new century, and the 100 years celebration of white Australia's federation in 2001.

Furthermore, that the Freedom Ride and *Priscilla* occurred in the Australian outback is highly significant for several reasons. Firstly, the outback is also a frontier/border zone. It is both a hostile and alien environment for white Australians, and a mythical place that informs their cultural tradition. Secondly, this borderland is not a static area but a site of crossings by the buses and their human and fictional inhabitants who are continually on the move through the outback. Finally, it is here at the boundary of "civility" that the travellers make visible those discursive boundaries concerned with gender, race, and nation (Hulme 1985:17-31).[17] And so I came to understand that the Freedom Ride and *Priscilla* chronicle the limits of, and challenges to, the discursive racial, gender, and national identity boundaries white Australia constructs when producing an image of itself as a unified community based on a pure Anglo-Celtic male culture and values (see Schaffer 1988). What the Freedom Ride achieves, and *Priscilla* unmasks, is the problematic construction of that representation. In doing this, they expose white Australia's fears and anxieties about sexual, racial, and national differences against which the nation defines itself.

A nation is essentially dissimilar and fragmented. Those Others it defines itself against continually threaten to permeate its fragile boundaries or, indeed, already inhabit sites of contestation. So the Australian outback, already a site of national differentiation, becomes during the buses' journeys a place of contestation. Although the 1965 Freedom Ride challenged the identity of a white Australia by confirming an Aboriginal presence through confrontation, their presence is still continually denied in the discourse on national identity. Moreover, the unceasing public struggle by Aboriginal peoples and their supporters for national recognition, as well as the 1992 Mabo decision by the High Court which recognized native land title,[18] continue to present Australian society with evidence of an Aboriginal presence still absent in the discourse on national identity. Given that white Australia defines itself at its boundaries by the ineffective exclusion of its others, and given the hysteria whipped up by the media after the Mabo decision, I wonder if it is at all possible for an Aboriginal identification to be included in a new national identity as the year 2001 approaches? If specific scenes from *Priscilla* are any indication, however, white Australia will continue to persist in denying the presence of its Others in order to preserve its mythical unified, pure Anglo-Celtic, male, identity.

Fictional Aborigines, like their material counterparts, are also already present in the outback. One night as *Priscilla* and the transvestites cross the apparently unoccupied Australian outback they too meet some Aborigines. The latter, unlike the white male populations in the outback towns who show a masculine apprehension of the transvestites, enjoy meeting and dancing with them. That the transvestites encountered the Aborigines at the border zones of civility confirms not only their presence, but also that they have already inscribed what the discourse on national identity mythologizes as 'empty' space. Through scenes which explore a supportive association of these two marginal groups, and when these scenes are taken in conjunction with the portrayal of the hostility that many white people project towards the transvestites, *Priscilla* exposes the anxiety that exists in white Australian society which stems from fear of penetration of its racial, sexual and national boundaries. Furthermore, the necessity for an Aboriginal presence in the movie at all, and their appearance at the boundaries of Australian civility, illustrate how in its articulation the discourse on national identity is as ambivalent and fearful as it is affirmed. Produced during a time of change and debate, *Priscilla*, rather than subverting the discursive boundaries constructed between white Australia and its Other, confirms them by having the Aborigines disappear from the movie.

The Cynthia character also sanctions the myth of a white, Anglo-Celtic, male, national identity. Her inclusion in *Priscilla* presents the audience with further 'evidence' of (an)other penetration of Australia's boundaries—this time by the 'Asian menace' who "are moving in just like ants" (Brown 1984).[19] This would be reason enough for her to disappear from the film. But there is another reason. From the view point of the discourse on nation her female presence raises the threat of hybridity through the birth of her children, their presence indicating a more successful penetration of white Australia's boundaries. And for me at least Cynthia's challenge to a white Australian audience never really fades. She drives towards an 'empty' horizon that site of both border crossings and differentiation (to make contact with the Aborigines? to wage an Asian 'invasion' from the north? to people the 'empty' north?), rather than towards an urban area where she can 'vanish' through assimilation into the national identity.[20]

Unlike my genderless representation of the Freedom Ride, gender is the central issue in *Priscilla*. By positioning both Cynthia and the white transvestites in the outback, *Priscilla* narrates the discursive limits of gender for white Australians. The ideology that informs the patriarchal discourse which structures white Australian society into only two genders—'women' and 'men'—informs these scenes. What the scenes with the Filipina character make visible is patriarchal white Australia's fears, desires and fantasies about society and women. Because men/maleness/masculinity is defined against women/femaleness/femininity, transvestites blur those differences, thereby highlighting the frailty of the boundary patriarchal ideology creates between them. To make sure spectators resist assenting to the blurring of the traditional male/female codification of society, and in

order to restore 'normal' heterosexual Australian structures, the movie calls on an already existing fantasy of white Australian masculinist sexual desires: the sexual Filipina embodied in the movie by the Cynthia character. And because white women and Woman are an absent presence in the traditional myths of the bush (see Schaffer 1988), Cynthia is essential to the preservation of the customary discursive boundaries that structure patriarchal heterosexual Australia.

Through her interruption of the transvestite's performance with a sexy dance of her own, white women's sexuality is displaced onto Cynthia. Furthermore she, as woman, replaces the transvestites as the legitimate object of the white male gaze, while simultaneously (re)iterating and disseminating Filipina-Australians' roles as sex objects of Australian men. As woman, she restores and (re)circulates 'normal' white Australian heterosexual relations for the audience in that most masculine of Australian spaces—a drinking bar. Yet Cynthia is not only a brown sexual woman but she is also the wife of a middle-aged white Australian. In her embodiment of the contradictory, discursive, stereotypical Filipina bride she unmasks the ambivalence at the source of the Filipina brides discourse. Because Cynthia is culturally and racially different from white Australian women, her body cannot be the process through which the category of femininity is (re)stated and (re)circled. So affirmation of the structures of heterosexual Australia occurs in the scene where a butch woman loses her drinking contest with the transsexual of the transvestite group. In a mirror image play on the ideology through which the discourse of patriarchy defines gender identification, the man who is now a woman plays his 'proper' role as a man in order to out-drink a woman who looks and acts like a man. Through such scenes set in the Australian outback, *Priscilla* explores gender differences in what appears to be a subversion of the traditional codification of society, only to reinstate the dominant patriarchal discourse which defines who is a woman and a man.

Priscilla does nothing to disrupt the knowledge/power relations which discipline discursive Filipina-Australians. Cynthia, as the representation of the stereotypical Filipina bride, is definitely not the discursive passive, submissive, wife of white Australian men. As an earthy woman apparently unable to control the passions of her body, she is the object of white, masculinist, sexual fantasies and desires, and also subject to material men when she marries. In its portrayal of the sexual power and attraction of the Filipina, the movie collapses the opposition between her passivity and activity, or between Filipina-Australian wives ('virgins') and Filipinas in general ('whores'). Herein lies the problem for white Australia's image of itself as a unified community based on pure Anglo-Celtic male values and culture. Because as historical sexual women who are wives, Filipina-Australian bodies give birth to future Australians.

Filipina-Australian wives remove the responsibility for future Australians from the hands of white Australian women (de Lepervanche 1989), while the presence of their Australian children fracture the accepted definitions of race and nation. These racially and culturally

different women, and their Australian children with their white Australian fathers, Australian birthright, and part-Asian part-Australian heritage, embody the contradiction at the site of the construction of the discourse on Australia's national identity. They are a material presence that continually confront white Australia with (an)Other successful penetration of its boundaries. For all these reasons, children of Filipina brides (as do other non-European peoples) harbor a threat to the stability of the traditional myths that structure white Australia and its national identity. They all confirm the complexities, fragmentations and, ultimately, the impossibility of a pure, uniform, white Australian identity and community and create difficulties for those white Australians endeavoring to reaffirm the traditional discursive boundaries of white Australia. Will these children become sites of acknowledgment and then disavowal? Or will they be perceived creatively as 'locations' of productivity through which Australia's fragmented and complex national identity will be negotiated and accepted by all Australians?

Notes

[*]I would like to thank Libby Camp, Rey Ileto, Lili Ma, and Kathy Shaw-Farrell for their comments, suggestions, and encouragement while I was writing this article.

[1]As of 30 June 1995 there were 91,834 Filipinos in Australia. More than half of those, 59,188, are Filipinas and 32,646, Filipino men. There are 27,108 Filipinas in Australia between the ages of 30-44 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1995:57-58). See also Jackson (1993:145,136).

[2]Flaneur means the man in the crowd: the idle stroller through the city—that public space—who observes but never interacts; a man who consumes the sights "through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze" (Pollock 1988:67, 70-72).

Patriarchy has historically and culturally constructed society as one in which masculinity is affiliated with dominance and power. Such a society regulates the position and roles of women and men to the detriment of women.

[3]For a discussion of popular novels that express fears about the 'empty north', see Dixon (1995), chaps. 7 and 8.

[4]For a recent reference which positions Filipina brides in the Australian outback, see Barrowclough (1995:47).

[5]I have taken my ideas here from Gubar (1985:294).

[6]For an explanation of binary oppositions, see Moi (1988:104-7).

[7]A skim through *Australian Playboy* and *Australian Penthouse* since the 1980s also continually reinforces the image of the sexual Filipina. Once more, see Morgan (1992).

[8]This quote is found in the back cover of Morgan (1992).

[9]The person making these statements is Dr. David Watkins (see Brown 1984). See also Watkins (1982).

[10]I have taken my ideas for this paragraph from Said (1978:176-7).

[11]According to the program, since the 1980s sixteen Filipinas and four children had been killed and a further three women had disappeared.

[12]*Priscilla* is the name of the bus in which the transvestites travel.

[13]Apparently Cynthia was not a problematic figure for some of those Filipinos who saw the movie in the Philippines.

[14]Two scenes that come to mind: one is the burial scene in which the spectator assumes the man being buried died from AIDS, when in fact he was killed by an accident with a hair-dryer; the other is the flashback scene in which sexual abuse of a young boy by his uncle is inferred, but the boy subverts the intention.

[15]There were a number of Freedom Rides throughout NSW in the mid-1960s and these were organized by the Student Action for Aborigines. Charles Perkins led the 1965 Freedom Ride.

[16]See the September 1996 maiden speech to the Federal Parliament by the Independent member for Oxley (Queensland), Pauline Hanson. Also her September 1996 debate about Aborigines on midday national television with Charles Perkins (of the Freedom Ride).

[17]I was thinking about these things when I started reading Dixon (1995), whose ideas in chaps. 7 and 8 are the foundation for my discussion in this section.

[18]The Mabo decision overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* which claimed that Australia had been unoccupied and unowned prior to white colonization. See Loos and Mabo (1996).

[19]The expression is used by a man interviewed for the article. A recent example of the fear of invasion by the "yellow peril" held by some white Australians surfaced again during the gun debate that followed the Port Arthur massacre on 28 April 1996.

[20]See Betchay Mondragon's *Inday:Mail-Order Bride* which played at the Studio Theater, Darwin, from 15-24 June 1995. In this play Inday becomes friends with an Aboriginal character, Arjubik. For a review of the play, see Morgan (1995).

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