ABSTRACT

MAIL ORDER BRIDES: A M.O.B. OF THEIR OWN

By

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In this thesis, I explore two works from Mail Order Brides/M.O.B., *A Public Message for Your Private Life* (1998) and *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein* (2003), that take into account the histories and identities produced within Filipino/a American communities. I use Sarita Echavez See and Emily Noelle Ignacio's theories on parody to analyze the performative aspects of M.O.B's artworks. According to See and Ignacio, parody can be utilized as a tool to simultaneously form solidarity within Filipino American communities. By examining these ideas, I argue that M.O.B. performs appropriated representations of their ethnic and assimilated cultures by using parody to critique and problematize often-misrepresented individual and cultural identities.

MAIL ORDER BRIDES: A M.O.B. OF THEIR OWN

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CHAPTER 1

M.O.B. AND PHILIPPINE HISTORY

During the fall of 1998, swarms of commuters and tourists throughout the avenues of San Francisco's Market Street unknowingly found themselves in the midst of an open exhibition showcasing the nascent work of three Filipina American artists. One specific poster calls the viewers in welcoming them with giddy eyes and smiles to a bountiful meal and urging them to fill their bellies with their native land's exotic delicacies. Plastered with Hollywood-*esque* movie poster titles and compositions, the signage takes on the demeanor of advertisements that are nice on the eyes, but repeat, or rather, depict satirical portrayals of the marketing patterns of many *big-time* movie companies. As pedestrians walk further down Market street, each poster asks questions to its audience: "Do You Play?," "Have You Eaten?," and "Are You Safe?" It is not until the pedestrian takes the time to fully and "personally ponder the provocative *preguntas* prepared per poster"[1] that the audience becomes aware of how atypical this messaging (or public imagery) appears. Are they advertisements, jokes, or works of art? The series is a form of public art that suggests its legitimate place within this commuter environment through its seemingly Hollywood-*esque* composition and aesthetic, and also, through its racial and gender-centered implications, which invite a direct association with the Market

[1] Jennifer Wofford, "MOB Projects," Wofflehouse, accessed January 1, 2014, http://wofflehouse.com/mob/mob-projects/.

Street minority commuter. This ambiguity concerning how to classify or label the posters introduces a provocative strategy that I will discuss in depth later on.

The works themselves, rendered in poster form similar to advertisements on Market Street kiosks, were an invitation to a public exhibition. Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. began their collective during the 1998 project for the San Francisco Arts Commission's Art in Transit program. Born out of the need for a female Filipino American collective, the three Fil-Am artists--Reanne Estrada, Jenifer Wofford, and Eliza Barrios--sustained a sisterhood irrespective of their own artistry as individual artists in order to collaborate in artworks that resemble the matriarchal lineage of their native Filipino roots. The poster series depicts the ongoing themes in their work: gender, race, and culture. To contrast the underlying, heavy-handed issues they present within their work, M.O.B. uses methods of parody, satire, and humor. In doing so, their collective depicts strategies in problematizing and propagating the complexity of Filipina American identity.

Why Problematize the Fil-Am Identity?

Ongoing debates about identity, in the wake of the Civil Rights 1960s movement and Feminist movements of the 1970s, have produced many studies and provided opportunities for discourse about the socially constructed aspect of identity. In my research, I specifically address the complexity and multiplicity of Filipina American identities. Clinical psychologist and educator Maria P. P. Root explains why identity is such a critical issue for Filipino/a Americans:

> . . . part of the 'identity crisis' of youth in the Filipino American community is reconciling issues of self-love and self-respect as Filipinos. . . . Concurrent with issues of empowerment concerning politics and economics, Filipino Americans must grapple with these issues of self-definition and inclusion to define our community, outline our concerns, and determine our path for the 21st century.[2]

Indeed, identity has been and is currently a pressing subject of Filipino American studies. Although identity politics has been a repeated subject, the fact remains that, much like many minority identities, there are still Filipina American stereotypes that plague and stigmatize these particular communities.

In analyzing the ways in which M.O.B.'s works partake in deconstructing stereotypical Filipina identities, one must first understand *how* and *why* these gender expectations were produced, as well as *what* exactly Filipina American identities often represent. During the pre-Hispanic and pre-colonial era, the Philippines was grounded in a matriarchal society where *babaylan* (shaman) religious leaders were typically female and, thus, held significant and influential positions within their tribal communities.[3] In some cases, men also held similar religious positions, but they still dressed in women's *babaylan* clothes so as to reinforce female authority.[4] Women in the Philippines at this time were treated as equal companions to their husbands and were entitled to the same

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[2] Maria P.P. Root, *Filipino Americans: Transformation and Identity* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 96.

[3] Lorna S. Torralba Titgemeyer, *La Mujer Indigena - The Native Woman,* University of Vienna, accessed April 12, 2013, http: //www.univie.ac.at/ Voelkerkunde/ apsis/aufi/wstat/mujer.htm.

[4] Ibid.

privileges as their male counterparts.[5] Fatima Bustos-Choy, PhD Philosophy, claims that the origins of the feminist movement in the Philippines can be traced through this lineage of female "priestesses, shamans, *babaylans*, and advisors to village chiefs."[6] Inevitably, colonization of the Philippines By Spain--and later on by the United States (1902-1946)--replaced the country's matriarchal system with Western culture's patriarchal power structure. During Spain's ravaging of the islands, missionaries, and colonizers effectively reconfigured the beliefs of the indigenous people's as a way to infiltrate the culture with an imposed ideology based on religion.[7] Massive conversion into Roman Catholicism in Luzon and the Visayas, the upper and middle regions of the Philippines, also produced new roles for Philippine men; they not only became Catholics, but they were also enrolled in programs that reformed (and often degraded) indigenous men into *upstanding and respected* priests or other highly positioned religious leaders.[8] Women, on the other hand, were barred from holding significant positions and titles within society and, thus, were exiled into the private space that was the household.[9] Not only was the religious aspect of life an effective way of infiltrating indigenous culture, but religion also displayed the ways in which the Spanish colonizers established a government directly

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Fatima Bustos-Choy, *Narratives on the Impact of Colonialism on the Lives of Modern-Day Filipino American Women in the Workplace* (San Francisco: California Institute of Integral Studies, 2009), 51.

[7] Ibid., 54.

[8] Raul Pertierra, *Religion Politics and Rationality in a Philippine Community* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 173.

[9] Root, 51.

connected to the power and authority of Catholicism, thereby promoting an unequal power dynamic between men and women.[10] Although women had almost full control of household responsibilities, such as caring for and raising children, cleaning, cooking, and managing the family's finances and making certain family decisions, they were still subordinate to the male population in the public sphere, and even in the household, their husbands still held the power in the relationship.[11] In the public sphere, female role models were limited to those that were accepted by Spanish colonists, such as the Virgin Mary, who they perceived to be a passive and docile, and Maria Clara, a protagonist in a novel by celebrated Philippine nationalist Jose Rizal. Maria Clara was the epitome of every Filipina ideal: graceful, sweet, shy, religious, reticent and beautiful (or, in other words, half-Caucasian).[12] She is the equivalent to America's "girl next door" archetype. Ironically, her birth also reinforced the violence against women during Spanish colonization; she was the product of a violent assault from a Spanish friar, Padre Dámaso, towards a native woman, Doña Pia.[13]

Although Maria Clara was portrayed as the submissive female, there were other Filipinas who refused to lay dormant. The Women of Malolos were a group of Filipinas

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[10] Pertierra, 173.

[11] Root, 51.

[12] Maria Clara was a character in Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*. Mina Roces, "Maria, Maria," in *Women's Movements and Womanhood 1986-2008* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2012): 20-21.

[13] Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. Leon Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Guerrero Publishing, 2010).

who fought for and gained the right to have an education during Spanish colonialism.[14] Ironically, even Rizal shows distaste for such submissive women like Maria Clara through a letter penned to the Women of Malolos: "If the Filipina will not change her mode of being, let her rear no more children, let her merely give birth to them. She must cease to be the mistress of the home, otherwise she will unconsciously betray husband, child, native land, and all."[15] The letter gives a contrasting and problematizing view of what nationalists, who, like Rizal, were seen as Spanish sympathizers, were trying to tell their country. Gabriela Silang is also another Filipina leader, who was a rebellion general from Illocos.[16] Silang led her men into battle in Illocos during 1762-63 and is renowned for her strength and courage, so much so that many Filipinas globally created a women's organization (Gabriela Network, or GABnet) in her name in 1984 to promote feminist action and education.[17]

Unfortunately, Spanish colonizers continued their creation of social hierarchies that promoted systematic oppression of indigenous peoples. Many colonizers began relationships with Filipino/as that inevitably created people of mixed heritage, the *mestizos* and *mestizas,* reinforcing another hierarchal feature Spain introduced to the Philippines--one based on skin color. With the introduction to a hierarchy based on

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[14] Alicia Arrizon, "The Filipino Twist on Mestizaje and Its Gendered Body," in *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 135.

[15] Arrizon, 136.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 137.

religious patriarchy, the Spanish colonizers also conditioned Filipinos to rely on an internalized racial hierarchy based on "colorism."[18] Root discusses "colorism" as a way to make the traditionally brown skinned, indigenous Filipino inferior to white or lighter skinned Spanish colonizers and/or *mestizo/as*; this reinforced the power dynamic between the lighter-skinned Spanish colonizer and his subordinate, brown-colored colony.[19] Consequently, Filipinas had additional issues of inequality to face, first with gender and then with skin color. By establishing an internalized hierarchy based on skin color, the Spanish effectively set up an oppressive mentality that corresponds brown skin with inferiority and reminds a Filipina that she is not good enough--for a European man, for a higher paying job, or even to be respected--unless she has light skin.[20] Furthermore, this "colorism" hierarchy expanded from the interactions between colonizer and colony into inter-community interactions, a hierarchy that is still prevalent in today's Filipino/a American community. Not only do Filipino/as apply these discriminations towards their own ethnicity, but, in contrast, there is also a backlash against this "colorism" hierarchy within the diasporic Filipino community. In Allyson Tiantiango-Cubales's case studies of Filipino American tools of pedagogy and interaction, she quotes a former UCLA

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[18] Root, 81.

[19] Ibid.

[20] "The title *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling* was selected because it acknowledges that Asian Americans do indeed face obstacles in the workplace and it asserts that there are cultural barriers that play a role in impeding career advancement. . . .While biases in the workplace do exist, this ceiling is not always imposed by others. As with many challenges, Asians should acknowledge that barriers could also stem from self-limiting cultural influences on their behavior, attitude, and performance in various social and professional settings;" Jane Hyun, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), "Introduction".

student about the discrimination she faces as a lighter-skinned Filipina-American: ". . . if you have lighter skin you kind of have this assumed privilege like all across the board…. So sometimes I feel like when I go into a Filipino American space then all of a sudden it's like, 'Since you get all this privilege outside of this space we're gonna give you shit while you're inside.'"[21] In this regard, Tintiangco-Cubales portrays the Filipina Americans' progression of assimilation towards accepting the ideals of what a stereotypical Filipina identity entails, both physically and mentally. Through this form of internalized discrimination, solidarity between Filipina Americans comes into question. Instead of trying to deconstruct these oppressive ideals of "Filipina identity" and re-contextualize an identity based on intersectionality--a methodology dealing with various systems of oppression and their dependence on one another[22]--Filipina Americans are prone to applying these oppressive tools toward one another in order to climb a pseudo-ladder of racial hierarchy with an unreachable top; they will never be able to possess the identity of the colonizer, who used these tools to oppress them in the first place.[23] This stigma of skin color is still a contemporary priority to many Filipina Americans and reflects deep-seated characteristics of Spanish colonialism within the Filipino/a neocolonialist attitude.

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[21] Allyson Goce Tintiango-Cubales, "Pinayism," in *Pinay Power*, ed. Melinda L. de Jesus (New York: Routledge, 2005), 147.

[22] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *The Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), 1242.

[23] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

After the Spanish-American war, which culminated in another era of colonization in the Philippines by another Western patriarchal-structured culture, Filipina identities were further influenced by another set of oppressions. Instead of using religious hierarchies, the United States used education as a form of oppressive order.[24] Through the application of a Westernized education system that introduced, produced, and maintained a capitalist economy within the Philippines,[25] United States colonialists created a power dynamic in which the Philippines became dependent on United States culture and the government. Implementing English as the primary language reinforced the United States colonists' authority and increased their influence upon indigenous people. While the United States colonists implemented education as a way to improve one's financial situation, in order to obtain a professional job after college Filipinos needed to move to industrialized cities. This geographical shift promoted an overall change from an agricultural economy towards a capitalist economy.[26] This economic shift allowed a few women to hold professional occupations, a clear difference from the roles women played under the Spanish who restricted their role to the private sphere. Yet, there were still some impoverished women who were unable to obtain jobs due to financial or geographical complications and found work in less educationally orientated occupations (i.e. domestic service and prostitution).[27] Prostitution provided an entrepreneurial opportunity for many American men and also the Philippine government

[24] Bustos-Choy, 54.

[25] Tiantiangco-Cubales, 184.

[26] Root, 25.

[27] Bustos-Choy, 54-56.

to attract tourists and, ultimately, create a source for profit, thereby exploiting poor Filipina because of the lack of other opportunities.[28] By exploiting these women in pseudo-cabarets directly for the amusement and pleasure of the foreigner, the identity of the Filipina was inevitably perceived as an exotically submissive sexual pleaser. Bustos-Choy describes how the "organized control of sexuality thus became entangled with American capitalist control of the Philippine economy," and, furthermore, this control of sexuality "contributes to present-day negative images of Filipino women; despite their numbers, Filipino women continue to be known as 'nameless, faceless overseas contract workers, sex workers, and mail-order brides . . . seen as objects of a sexist, imperial ideology, yet remaining invisible as subjects and agents.'" [29] In later twentieth century, prostitution developed into an economical resource for the Philippines through the production of mail order brides. Filipina brides, with the help of matchmaking services, found husbands abroad who helped them move out of the stagnant economy of the Philippines and into (hopefully) a life of abundance.[30] Through these situations, a singular, homogenous Filipina identity is produced as the subservient wife that any foreigner would want in any spouse.

Even after independence, the Philippine society and government still heavily relied on and looked up to US culture. After World War II, Filipinos who were lucky

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[28] Bustos-Choy, 56.

[29] Ibid., 56.

[30] Federico V. Magdelena, *Misusing the Internet: The Case of Filipino Mail Order Brides*, Hawaii University, accessed March 12, 2013, http://www.hawaii.edu/cps/pinay-mob.html.

enough to gain a Western-based education in the Philippines found themselves in a difficult position; the Philippine economy was not prosperous enough to provide a sufficient amount of jobs for professional workers during the educational boom.[31] Due to the dynamic relationship between the United States and the Philippines, the second wave of emigration occurred, creating a "brain drain" within the Philippine nation.[32] Filipino immigrants' priorities were to find better opportunities abroad in order to make enough money to send back home, in the form of remittances, and eventually retire back in the Philippines; they were not interested in making permanent settlements in America. The presence of the Filipino/a immigrant in the United States only resurrected, if not continued, the former colonial relationship between Filipino and American citizens, however, this was already an accepted notion within the neocolonialist mindset of many immigrant Filipinos. This neocolonialist mentality is a situation where "the host society, almost always dictate the terms on which the colonizers/immigrants interact with the host society," and "For as long as the nonwhite immigrants were satisfied with the status accorded them and not perceived as threats to the competitive advantage of the white

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[31] Root, 25.

[32] The first wave of Philippine immigrants occurred during a time of United States colonization, primarily resulting from agricultural workers who found agricultural jobs working abroad. The second wave was based on professional workers finding better opportunities in the United States and effectively creating a brain drain on the Philippine society. A brain drain is when a significant amount of people who help provides for the country's cultural and economical resources through their professions suddenly begin to migrate from that country, effectively limiting the amount of resources that country possesses. For more information on first wave immigration and the brain drain, see Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

majority, they were tolerated."[33] Since the US colonized the Philippines and implemented an education based on a Western capitalistic economy, the Philippines remained dependent on the U.S. government and is still placed in an entrapment that mimics the colonizer/colonized relationship. Additionally, other aspects of this relationship also continued, such as the use of and acceptance of oppressive tools originally meant for hierarchal means within Filipino colonial society, but which are now applied to other minorities in the United States. Root discusses that Filipino immigrants accepted the tools of racism and discrimination evident in US culture in order to be in compliance to with their host's needs.[34] This in turn relates to the Asian American crux: the model minority myth--a hegemonic tool that uses the success of a portion of Asian Americans as an example of the easy access to the *American Dream.*[35] Author Stacy J. Lee states: "While Asian Americans were held up as shining examples of hard work and good citizenship, African Americans were positioned as loud, complaining, and lazy . . . . Thus, as a hegemonic device the model minority stereotype maintains the dominance of whites in the racial hierarchy by diverting attention away from racial inequalities and by setting standards for how minorities should behave."[36] By fitting in and integrating with

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[33] Root, 32. For more information on the neocolonial relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines, see Ligaya Lindio-McGovern, "The Neocolonial Philippine Political Economy: American Neocolonial Control," in *Filipino Peasant Women: Exploitation and Resistance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

[34] Root, 34.

[35] Stacy J. Lee, *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), introduction.

[36] Ibid.

the US host's cultural mannerisms, Filipino immigrants would be less likely to draw attention to themselves--the more invisible, the better.

Eventually, many immigrants permanently settled in the United States, and in contrast to the unassimilated status their parents and grandparents held, American-born Filipino/as are no longer "guests" in the host's country; they have are the hosts and, therefore, seek to define the individuality and the rights with which they were born with. Not only do these women need to have the ability to prove their Filipino-ness, but they also need to show that they are part of the American culture. Even as American-born citizens, however, many Filipinas are still stigmatized with the same stereotypical identities placed on their colonized ancestors: the exotic, brown-skinned, submissive, subservient, and shy beauty who allocates her services to the authorial white man. While the issue of the mail order bride is longstanding and will most likely continue, as it is still an economic resource for the Philippines,[37] many Filipina Americans feel the backlash and are stigmatized, as well, because their identities are tied to those of the infamous mail order bride. Unfortunately, many tools of oppression are still being used within Filipina

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[37] People are now the Philippines's best and greatest export. Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and those living abroad make up about 2 percent of the entire country's population, roughly about 2 million people. Many of these people are domestic workers, but also can be brides living abroad. While these Filipinos are living abroad, they also help their families back home by sending remittances. These remittances not only help the direct family of those living abroad, but also help the country's economy by giving people money to spend within the Philippines. In the Philippines, "remittances are actually the second largest source of foreign reserves;" see Sarah L. Bhatia, "Overseas Filipino Workers Become Economic Heroes," Stanford University, accessed January 20th, 2015, http://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/overseas_filipino_workers_become_economic_heroes_20130415 and Christine S.Y. Chun, "The Mail-Order Bride Industry: The Perpetuation of Transnational Economic Inequalities and Stereotypes," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Economic Law* 17 no. 4 (Winter 1996): 1155-1208.

American communities today, such as hierarchies based on skin color or gender; however, many Filipina Americans are trying to effectively change the ways in which Filipino/a communities are judged by these value-laden biases, which opens up the possibility of deconstructing and re-contextualizing the Filipina stereotypical identity in order to prevent the risk of repeating and continuing faux nostalgic representations of a socially constructed identity.

Methodologies Used to Study M.O.B.'s Work

In order to analyze and understand how identity is (de)constructed, I look to the methodologies of two Filipina American educators who use humor and parody as tools to critique the singularity of "the Filipino/a Identity." Sarita Echavez See, who teaches Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies at The University of Michigan, points to humor as a key characteristic of Filipino/a American identity, and punning as a potentially subversive tool for both politicizing and critiquing cultural issues within the community. Emily Noelle Ignacio, who teaches Sociology, Ethnic, Gender and Labor Studies at the University of Washington, also discusses humor as a strategy for constructing and critiquing Filipino/a American identity in her research, which focuses on connections between the Internet and diasporic communities and the formation of cultural identities that evolve in the exchange. Through the work of scholars like Echavez See and Ignacio who use interdisciplinary approaches, Filipino/a American visual culture is gaining increased representation within academic scholarship. Within art history, however, this culture, whose traditions date back before colonization and are deeply rooted in folklore, oral history, mythology, and humor, remains marginally represented at best with few artists obtaining the attention they deserve.

Ignacio and Echavez See both investigate the use of parody and joking in Filipino communities as tools for creating solidarity and also "to resist colonial and racial scholar assimilation."[38] Since pre-Hispanic times, Filipinos have had an orally driven culture, and through the use of joke making, this has not changed. Ignacio contends that for a people that is largely a diasporic community,[39] joke making and parody are often forms of establishing membership within a community that is outside the homeland.[40] It is necessary to find similarities and reminiscent aspects of Filipino culture within a new American culture abroad in order to create unity and solidarity within this group. According to Ignacio, these jokes

> . . . ease that pain and simultaneously create a sense of community, and thus, a Filipino group identity . . . . When debates about Filipino identity became so profuse that people started questioning the very possibility of attaining a group ethnic identity as well as the unification of Filipinos, jokes were offered to show us that we Filipinos can and do share a common bond.[41]

While in search of a national identity, and inevitably a cultural identity, in a post-colonial era, the community forms a solidarity that is built on similarities with the "homeland," but it also needs to be understood that these folkloric or *shared* characteristics do not apply to the community as a whole. Instead, authors, such as

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[38] Sarita Echavez See, "Filipino's are Punny," in *Philippine Studies: Have We Gone Beyond St. Louis?* ed. by Priscelina Patajo-Legasto (Manila: University of the Philippines Press, 2008), 71.

[39] The Philippines' top export is people. Due to this, there are many Filipinos around the World living as immigrants and/or dual citizens in various countries; Kale B. Fajardo, *Filipino Crosscurrents* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[40] Emily Noelle Ignacio, *Building Diaspora: Filipino Community Formation on the Internet* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 71.

[41] Ibid., 162-163.

Theodore Gonzalves, PhD. Asian American Studies, writes that the characteristics that have become familiar to a newer generation--those that are constructed since the days of the World's Fair, which consists of small little, brown people shown as spectacles of entertainment--have become identifying factors of representation when we, as American-born Filipinos, think of the culture and history from which our immigrant parents derived. And additionally, these characteristics are those that inevitably become who we ought to be instead of who we, as a heterogenic community, represent. Instead of exhibiting a complex and contemporaneous cultural identity, this identity becomes a nostalgic identity that is based on a reminiscent and somewhat invented past. Then, our created and accepted identity is not only stereotypically based on the beliefs of the outsider--the previous colonial power and/or dominant culture--but also an identity based on a series of memories, characteristics and expectations that are unrepresented as a whole.

This is where parody comes into play; while joke-making and humor are used to create solidarity and bonding within the community, parody is a tool used by members to help continually critique and evolve this group identity--to progress towards Filipino and Filipino American redefinition of community and self. No longer should there be a homogeneous representation of Filipino American communities, but a multitude of individuals that make up a heterogeneous body of solidarity--one that differs through variants of gender, sexuality, class, and an overall individual nature.

Traditionally, parody is used in literature to portray a satirical imitation; it adds exaggeration or inappropriate elements to the original, often times, serious subject. This satirized imitation is often intended to do more than provide entertainment for the viewer;

it allows for the critical analysis of the original subject. How have these exaggerations shown the original subject in a different light? In what ways has this parodied subject brought together different viewership? Parody not only provides an opportunity to think critically about how and why certain Filipino identities/stereotypes were formed, but it also allows for open discourse about Filipinos in both an academic and social space. By taking on a parodic discourse specifically rooted in Filipino culture, Filipino American artists are placing "Filipinos at the center of cultural creation instead of merely passively taking in outside cultural influences."[42] Filipina American artists, such as M.O.B., use parody to address a more specified area of critique and reconstruction--Filipina American identities.

Mail Order Brides/M.O.B.

Turning to the works of the art collective Mail Order Brides/M.O.B., I apply the methods previously discussed by Ignacio, and Echavez See to analyze how Filipina American contemporary artworks, such as those by M.O.B., can contribute to the discourse regarding Filipina American identities. M.O.B. is the brainchild of three Filipina American artists: Reanne "Immaculata" Estrada, Jenifer "Baby" Wofford, and Eliza "Neneng" Barrios. Each of the artists come from a different Filipino background: Wofford, a self-described third world kid, comes from a military family; Barrios, is a first generation Filipina American; and Estrada, is an immigrant transplant from the Philippines. This complex mix of a collective not only introduces differences within the global Filipino diaspora, it also gives a reference to the themes of their artworks. While the name Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. was a deliberate act, the creation of the group can be

[42] Echavez See Ibid., 174.

summed up in one word: organic. Barrios describes that many of the feminist themes in their work are inevitable and natural parts of the collective's artistic process. When questioned about their role as artists, all three women made a point to reference an influential Bay Area artist, gallerist, and community activist--Carlos Villa. Estrada states:

> It's something that I know in my own practice that's really expanded the type of work that I do and how my role is [sic] not just in the arts, but in the community with my relationships with young people, as well as different community members. It's more about inserting the artist into more public dialogue.[43]

Wofford explains that many of their works revolve around "inserting the Filipina in spaces that normally that's not present," while Estrada expands, "It is [sic] playing and deconstructing expectations of identity and pushing those boundaries ."[44]

Since creating the collective in 1995, the trio has since actively "engaged in an ongoing conversation with culture, race and gender"[45] in order to question the subservient and exoticized Filipina stereotype promoted through the media and American culture.[46] Using the name "Mail Order Brides" problematizes what society automatically attributes to Filipina Americans (or many other Asian women); the reference to "mail order brides"

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[43] Interview with M.O.B., April 2014.

[44] Interview with M.O.B.

[45] "Mail Order Brides/M.O.B.," Wofflehouse, accessed February 20, 2013, http://wofflehouse.com/mob/mail-order-bride-of-frankenstein/.

[46] Megan Wilson, *Mail Order Brides: The Untold Story*, Megan Wilson, accessed March 1, 2013, http://www.meganwilson.com/writings/mob.htm.

directly links to such stigmatizing terms as those plagued with yellow fever[47] and gold digging foreigners. The contradictory aspect in the use of the acronym M.O.B. has not escaped the collective. The supplemental name produces an ironic twist that helps turn the stereotype of the subservient Filipina (American) on its head by conjuring up the image of an anti-obedient, almost sinister group of Filipina American artists. A complete opposite of the "submissive Filipina" stereotype, this Filipina American collective is ready to fight back. Through this *starring* role, the artists literally take on performative measures to assure "authentic" representations of Filipina Americans. While performing the role of what traditionally is considered the epitome of the dutiful Filipina (American), M.O.B. also uses parody to break down stereotypical identities of what a Filipina (American) *should* be. Employing different avenues of media (public art, film, and photography) to further the exposure of their work, M.O.B. turns these issues and themes back onto Filipino American culture, while also centralizing Filipino/a American discourse. Coming from different backgrounds, the trio raise awareness of the ongoing neocolonial mindset of Filipina Americans, and, in doing so, re-contextualize, re-create and add complexity to the stereotypical and singular Filipina American identity.

[47] Yellow fever addicts, or asianphiles, are understood by US society to be usually men who have a Filipina or Asian fetish. They are only attracted to and will only date Asian women. Many times, these fetishes are based on stereotypical identities of Asian women, including Filipinas, as subservient, exotic, submissive, etc.

Estrada explains:

> For us the idea of putting on these roles, taking them off, trying them on, different mixing and matching has to do with the constructive nature of identity and the way we see it--that's the exploration. How is it created? How is the illusion to maintained and perpetuated? How is it utilized in ways to support your own agenda? So I think that for us is a critical piece of the inquiry.[48]

These issues are significant within art historical practice and Filipino/a American society because they allow for a more expansive questioning of Filipino American contemporary art and issues that need to be raised, discussed, and confronted within Filipino American communities and larger society. This is more than just an analysis of a body of work; I identify a process in their work that provides a different way of critiquing and understanding issues within Filipino/a American communities, especially for people in other communities that have not yet been exposed to these ongoing ideological identity problems. A study of this collective also brings into focus contemporary Filipino/a American art from the margins and introduces diverse discourses about these issues that lie outside the traditional sphere in which they are primarily discussed.

The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis provides the reader with a chronological and sequential study on the ways in which M.O.B.'s oeuvre has progressed in the scope of fifteen years. My argument will also build upon the previous methodologies discussed through an art historical analysis. In the second chapter, I go further in my analysis of M.O.B.'s *A Private Message For Your Private Life* (1998) through the methodologies of Echavez See and Ignacio, taking into consideration public art activists well-celebrated in art history: Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Patssi Valdez. Situating M.O.B.'s work in this art

[48] Interview with M.O.B.

historical sphere helps to bridge the gap between the public art strategies of these renown artists to those of M.O.B., thereby portraying that the use of these strategies are still relevant in the contemporary and marginalized spaces of art.

In the third chapter, I discuss M.O.B.'s artistic expansion into film and video through their work, *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein* (2003). This section first investigates the roles of film and performance in Filipino and Filipino American culture. I also analyze the "Filipino mimicry" and how this in turn relates to not only Filipino entertainment culture, but also parody, specifically how parody works in M.O.B.'s film. In addition, *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein* is also analyzed in conjunction with M.O.B.'s karaoke film series; I discuss the relationship between Filipino mimicry and the significance of karaoke in Filipino and Filipino American culture. A comparison between M.O.B.'s appropriation of James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* and the original film noir version follows. I conclude this chapter with an account of how M.O.B. applied the methods of parody towards a previously stark and serious film and ended up turning it into a film reaming with controversial social issues pertaining to the mail order bride.

In breaking down and analyzing the works of the Filipina American artist collective Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. in conjunction with the theories of familial Filipino (American) concepts of humor and parody, I bridge the gap between canonical art history and marginalized contemporary Filipino/a (American) artists and provide a critical set of tools that aid in re-contextualizing Filipina American identities.

CHAPTER 2

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE ABOUT YOUR PRIVATE LIFE

> I'm interested in pictures and words because they have specific powers to define who we are and who we aren't. And those pictures and words can function in as many places as possible. Barbara Kruger[49]

Much like Barbara Kruger's favoritism of pictures and words set in public spaces, Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. uses a similar tactic in questioning how and why these visuals display who we can and cannot be. During the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s, issues of inequality, racism, and classism sparked the outcry of various marginalized communities within the U.S. As a result, many women in the art community took to their work to express their experienced injustices; public and activist art became prominent methods for fighting or revolting against the dominant, patriarchal culture. Artists such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Patssi Valdez help bring the focus of art and reception from the inner walls and sanctum of the museum and gallery into the public sphere, thus, creating works specifically for the everyday person and positioning these pieces on the street. Focusing on social, cultural and political critique, their work became the basis of the 70s and 80s art from the streets movements. M.O.B.'s work depicts parallels from their practice of art as public intervention when strategizing *A Public Message for Your Private Life* (1998).

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[49] Barbara Kruger, quoted in Mitchell, "An Interview with Barbara Kruger," *Feminism: The Public and Private* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 305.

In 1998, M.O.B.'s poster series was plastered throughout Market Street kiosks allowing many commuters passing by to view the posters in their everyday routine. Created for the "Art In Transit" program of the San Francisco Arts Commission, the posters helped bring art to the public streets of San Francisco. The posters were a series of staged photographs in which M.O.B. envisioned and portrayed exaggerated, but typical and familial scenes of Filipina American life. Each poster came with questions placed at the top, somewhat referencing movie title posters with Filipina American themes that proposed questions for its public viewer: "Have you eaten?" (fig. 1), "Are you entertaining?" (fig. 2), "Do you feel safe?" (fig. 3), "How much longer?" (fig. 4), "Why don't you settle down?" (fig. 5), or "Do you play?" (fig. 6). Every poster depicts an intentionally composed scene where the artists are performing as potentially pseudo-ideal Filipina Americans, playing up to the camera and the audience, wanting to attract and create a spectacle on the busy stage that is Market Street.

Ternos and Filipinas

In "Have you eaten?," the audience, or everyday commuter, takes on the role of a pseudo-peeping tom lurking outside a blue paneled window. To our surprise, three women stare back to greet us and lure us with food to come inside. They are dressed in vibrant, yet tacky, colored *ternos*--the national dress of elite Filipinas. The brightly clad Filipina Americans not only reciprocate the spectators' stare, but smile back enthusiastically. It is as if they have been preparing and waiting for this very moment. The elaborate, over the top spread on the table suggests any visitor will get a royal welcome from these perfectly coiffed hostesses decked out in their *terno* best, even

though their cheap wedge sandals reveal the characteristic comfort footwear worn by those assigned to do the domestic chores.

The *terno*, a remnant from Spanish colonialism, was embraced into the Philippine culture during the time of American colonialism to represent political protest against the militarization and Westernization occurring in the country at the time.[50] The poster depicts a consistent preservation of Spanish colonialist influence due to the *terno*'s association with the *mestizo* and the character of Maria Clara. Traditionally, the elite Filipina, and/or more likely *mestiza*, who wears the *terno* is a "highly feminized, demure, marriageable, and upper-class "[51] woman, whose class and status are directly indicated by her dress. This persona is also exemplified by another poster, "Why don't you settle down?," which depicts the scene of a *terno*-clad woman being urged by her traditionally dressed parents to find her domestic destiny, a future filled in the arms of the private sphere. While the woman faces towards the window, trying to seek solace from the nagging sentiments of her parents, the audience is at once enthralled by her multiple representations in the background--photos of her past and present as the glamorized, ideal daughter, which become the focal point of this poster. The multiplicity of the daughter's gaze towards the viewer and outside world is a last ditch attempt to escape her imminent domestic future, and ours as well. Although Maria Clara is a national icon from the Philippines, her connection to the use of the *terno*, as well as her shy and submissive

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[50] Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, "Your Terno's Draggin: Fashioning Filipina American Performance," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 21, no. 2 (December 2011): 204, accessed March 1, 2013, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2011.607597.

[51] Ibid., 200.

demeanor, indicates how these ethnic ideals are still pertinent to the ideals in the diasporic community. Through this correlation to the nationally made icon, Filipina (American) identities are continually influenced by another culture. In performing the role of the homogeneous and idealized Filipina, M.O.B. dons the *terno*, but also creates a parody (and contradictory display) of its symbolism through the use of vibrantly tacky colors and exaggerated make-up and facial expressions. The romanticized meaning of the *terno* in connection with Filipina identities is dismantled as a result.

Going back into the "Have you eaten?" scene, the *terno*-clad women sit in a typical Filipino dining room: a framed Virgin Mary is reflected through the large vanity mirrors that hold trinkets of Filipino memories; the room has the familiar convention of checkered-covered floors; and the dining table is covered with Filipino delicacies. The eager Filipina hostesses urge us to eat the food of their homeland that lies on the palms of their hands, if only we would come inside. But in the mere acceptance of this invitation, the spectator is made responsible for not just being a good guest, but responsible for reading in between the lines of this invitation as well. These women are not femme fatale creatures who try to rake in your money or attention; they seduce through the representation of something familiar and comforting. This use of Mary is parallel to ASCO member Patssi Valdez's personal representation of the Virgen from her ethnic culture in the work *Walking Mural* (1972), which was a direct response to the cancellation of the annual Christmas Parade on Whittier Boulevard due to the Los Angeles riots at the time. All dressed in Christmas attire, including actual inanimate Christmas objects, the group marched down one of East Los Angeles's busiest streets and came into direct contact with their audience--people who would have been spectators to,

if not participants in, the annual event. What is most fascinating is Valdez's personal representation of the Virgen--the Catholic Virgen Morean, or dark-skinned virgin, that holds a very deep connection to her Mexican ancestry. Instead of portraying the Virgin Mary, who is usually depicted as a fair-skinned Caucasian woman, Valdez links her public performance for Christmas with her Chicana roots as part of this public intervention. Using this image also brings to mind "the very language through which power is perceived, but also the symbolic imagery through which the (Mexican) nation is constructed."[52] She was responding not only to the cancellation of the Christmas parade, but also what the image of the Virgen brings forth--an often-limiting restriction of female empowerment that the Catholic Church has socially constructed. Valdez and ASCO intervene in the public space with a very personal message brought by a performative representation that is entirely tied to the ancestry of the group.

M.O.B. takes into consideration the Filipino relation to the Virgin Mary as well. In "Have you eaten?" we see this not only in the inclusion of a home altar with an image of the divine Saint, but also in the portrayal of Filipinas as submissive and hospitable women. Using this connection to the Virgin Mary, M.O.B. alludes to the forced Catholic assimilation in the Philippines and other Spanish colonies, i.e., Mexico, which introduced gender and racial hierarchies to the newly overtaken lands. Both M.O.B. and Valdez, thus bring to mind the inequalities and stereotypes produced by the organizations that are in relation to this female icon. The use of these stereotypical representations and icons of women and men from the Chicano community is also another way ASCO signaled its "nausea" not only with American society, but with the inner workings of its own

[52] Valdez, 13.

community and the stereotypes constructed within this environment by fellow Chicano artists and everyday people. Like Valdez, M.O.B. takes this representation of a submissive and patient idealization of the minority woman into the public sphere to raise discussion about the construction of these archetypes. Their reproductions and inclusions of each Virgin allude to stereotypes and power dynamics attributed to each culture, but also critiques. M.O.B. makes us question why the role of the perfect Filipina American hostess, and even exotic Filipina, is something to be desired in the first place. Artist and writer Megan Wilson notes that the works leave "the audience to muse over the relevance these inquiries may have in their own lives, as well as the complicated social and familial representations contained within the humorous, highly-charged vignettes."[53]

By performing the identity of Filipina Americans, which carries connotations of the submissive and serving woman set since the days of Philippines's colonization, M.O.B. welcomes the audience into the scene (and world) of Filipina American stereotypes. Historian Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns quotes Judith Lorber as she describes this performance in the context of dressing up in drag, where the ". . . core elements are performance and parody. Drag exaggerates gendered dress and mannerisms with enough little incongruities to show the 'otherness' of the drag artist."[54] Through this use of drag and parody, M.O.B. simultaneously plays the part of the stereotypical Filipina American wife, but also depicts a criticality toward this Filipina American caricature; their vibrant performances pull the audience in, who, in turn, become intrigued and amused, but the

[53] Wilson.

[54] Judith Lorber, quoted in San Pablo Burns, 207. Preface to *The Drag Queen Anthology*, by Lisa Underwood (New York: Routledge, 2009), xxv.

parodies they enact also hold the audience accountable for observing their theatrics in a critical manner. Their goal, though, is not to entertain us through these stereotypes, but to help us critique the ideals of Filipina identities they are presenting. In an interview with Christine Brenneman, Estrada points out that the posters (and their work in general) want to "Take [the audience] out of their reality so that maybe they can better reflect on it or look at it from a different point of view."[55] Their goal is not to just entertain the audience through these exaggerated portrayals, but to help them read between the subliminal lines of the idyllic personas they are digesting.

Public vs. Private

By giving the audience, or the commuter, a break in his or her day to view and be entertained by this colorful performance, M.O.B. places them in a different reality where they are able to reflect and question how they view the work and the issues surrounding it. M.O.B. exhibits in the public space whereas traditionally, and most likely during the colonial period, women were seen as belonging to the domestic sphere. Being victimized as the weaker sex during the time of colonization by two dominant patriarchal cultures, women were constantly told they belonged in the household--rearing children and taking care of the home. Throughout this series, M.O.B. over-performs a variety of these familiar and domestic female roles, such as, maids, mothers, hosts, and rebellious daughters, and in the process they question the boundaries of Filipina American personas. But it is the location of these posters in the public space that creates a contrasting barrier between the public and private sphere. M.O.B. questions the very idea of these spaces:

[55] Christine Brenneman, *Filipino Fetish,* MetroActive, accessed March 1, 2013, http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sfmetro/10.19.98/mailorderbrides-9840.html.

who belongs where? Why are these contrasting environments being fused? What are the cultural and political ramifications of keeping these spheres separate?

In the poster, "Do you feel safe?" M.O.B. takes on parodic representation through the overdramatic facial expressions of three women glimpsed through a decoratively barred door. Each woman portrays a different identity: the classical *terno*-wearing wife; the obedient maid; and the 21st century Fil Am. Unlike the vibrant windowsills or wide open spaces framing the women in the other posters, M.O.B. captures these women in a darkened doorframe, their faces literally barred behind irons gates protecting--or preventing--the women from the public space. The darkened outer frame that represents this public space is juxtaposed with the contrastingly lighter and warmer view of the domestic space where these women are kept like the rare, exotic butterflies that decorate the interior. Two butterflies seem to have escaped out on this side of the threshold, but there is a question as to whether the coated woman with one hand on the door will be able to escape. The inclusion of butterflies also brings to mind the Filipino folklore about the creation of the butterfly. In Damania Eugenio's work *Philippine Folk Literature: The Myths*, she writes of an old woman who tended to her beautiful garden, which was regarded by her neighbors as magical because of its beauty.[56] One day, a couple whose vainness matched the beauty of the flowers came upon her garden only to ridicule the woman as an ugly witch.[57] This altercation ended with the old woman giving the couple exactly what they desired--to be beautiful forever--and she changed them into the first

[56] Damania Eugenio, ed. *Philippine Folk Literature: The Myths* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1993), 353.

[57] Ibid.

butterflies.[58] Butterflies in this case can represent beauty, but also hold a poisonous backstory. These beautiful creatures may be soft and delicate, but they are also formed from a twisted and ironic mythology. Not all that glitters is gold, and therefore, not all that is delicate and beautiful is weak. All three women's roles and femininity are represented through dress and the abundance of flowers and butterflies floating within the gendered environment of the home. M.O.B. is depicting the exaggerated femininity and softness that is often attributed to the female gender, and, by extension, the domestic space in which she is restricted. The wife and maid both question their outward bounding friend's choice to leave this supposed safe space, and, by extension, they also pose this question to the viewer. *Is it safe for women to be outdoors? Should women risk going outside? But perhaps even more importantly, why should we feel the need to ask this question in the first place?*

In contrast to the fear of going beyond the domestic boundary, M.O.B. also depicts the exaggerated opposite in the poster, "How much longer?" Here a woman sits at the window, waiting longingly for the attention of what we assume is her male lover; oblivious, he is seated behind her with his back turned away from the window, totally preoccupied with his computer. In the meantime, she waits wistfully at the opened windowsill that is wrought with an abundance of outpouring flowers that mimic her woe-begotten love life. Her look of longing also introduces a need for outside nourishment. She is a woman stuck inside the confines of a home, while her desire for something--anything--to take her away from her boredom or inadequate state of love is leading her towards the outside world. Here, we see an overdramatized scene of lust and

[58] Ibid.

lack of love, one that is primarily centered around the need for more and the potential for opportunities that lay beyond the boundary that is the home. This woman is so close to breaking that domestic and lackluster boundary; all she has to do is reach out and mimic the overgrown flora that is ringing her windowsill. This poster can be seen as successor to "Why don't you settle down?" where we now view the circumstances that come with obeying and becoming the idealized Filipina daughter.

Displaying parodic images of women inside the household, taking on familiar female roles as maids, mothers, hosts, and nearly rebellious daughters, but adding an exaggerated performance of these roles in an environment like Market Street, M.O.B. both creates a contrasting barrier between the public and private sphere and questions the very idea of these barriers: *who belongs where? Why are these contrasting environments being fused? What are the cultural and political ramifications of keeping these spheres separate?* Barbara Kruger, who made a splash in the art world with her combination of textual language and visual imagery, once stated in an interview, "I feel that there are many of us who are working to make certain displacements, certain changes, who are invested in questions rather than the surety of knowledge. And I think that those are the ways that we displace that flow a little or redirect it."[59] Kruger has stated in the past that much of her work relates to the use of stereotypes as a way to interact with her audience, and that she predominantly or significantly identifies with the female spectator.[60] She describes stereotypes in the following: "I also think that stereotype is a very powerful

[59] Barbara Kruger, quoted in Mitchell, 303.

[60] Mitchell, 310.

form and that stereotype sort of lives and grows off of that which was true, but since the body is absent, it can no long be proven."[61] This idea of using stereotype as a theme and jumping-off point in making public works similar to M.O.B.'s work. Stereotype is used as a sign that is continuously coded and encoded and decoded by the people--the public and the artist who is part of this public--who created them.

Placing the traditional idea of who and where Filipina Americans should be in a very public, very male-dominant space introduces the discourse of misogyny and sexism that occur in the public domain. It is as if the members of M.O.B. have taken it upon themselves to address and problematize the issues that women and minorities encounter in the community via visual advertisement. They confront the community as a whole through their placement of these visually appealing posters on kiosks near areas of public transportation to target the commuter, the industry, the tourists, and the San Franciscan. Due to the diversity and commuter environment of San Francisco and Market Street, spectators of their public artwork were made up of different races, classes, and genders. In a later show called "Babaylan" for San Francisco State University, M.O.B. once again exhibited these posters outside at a bus stop near the school and had one of their posters stolen.

The kiosks housing the posters, which Wofford states were the inspiration for the poster series, resemble the native Filipino *bahay kubo*, a *nipa* hut that many Filipinos in the countryside reside in; it is also a cultural symbol for community strength. This reference to the *bahay kubo* combined with the exaggerated domestic roles of women in the public space of Market Street problematizes the very image that M.O.B. depicts.

[61] Ibid.

By displaying their work in a shared city-center of many Filipino Americans and also other minorities, M.O.B. helps to expose Filipina American and female issues at the core of their work to a broader audience. M.O.B. is not only questioning the ways in which Filipino/a Americans understand Filipina American identities, but also how Americans or possibly tourists view such cultural references, as well.

Movie Poster Aesthetic

To further introduce the discrepancy between public and private discourses in a covert way, M.O.B. also uses many enticing aesthetic conventions and compositions that are standard in the movie industry to attract audiences. Edwin E. Poole and Susan T. Poole state in "Collective Movie Posters: An Illustrated Reference Guide to Movie Art" that poster advertisements at the turn of the century heavily relied on visually appealing images rather than words due to the high illiteracy rates.[62] The standard in posters at the time featured vibrant colors and pictures that "provided a means of advertising on a level that could be understood by the majority of the general public."[63] In contemporary times, posters are primarily used to lure a prospective audience to a potentially blockbuster movie, but many studios still rely on visually striking and eye-catching techniques to bring attention to the myriad of posters on the streets and billboards, whether through color, celebrity features, or composition. M.O.B.'s use of primary bright colors in "Have you eaten?" is one of the most attention-grabbing characteristics of this series. Like Kruger's works that always contain a combination of red, black, and white, a mixture of colors that often represent both the female voice and body she speaks from and also

[62] Edwin E. Poole and Susan T. Poole, 10-11.

[63] Ibid.

similar marketing techniques used in the advertisement industry, M.O.B.'s use of primary colors evokes a theme--the Filipino flag colors. Depicted vertically and visually through the inclusion of three Filipinas wearing traditional *ternos* in red, yellow, and blue, the collective portrays an alluring and almost chaotic scene of a typical Filipino home, but also brings to mind a sense of patriotism in the most subliminal way. In many historical artworks by Philippine artists, such as Juan Luna's famous *Espana y Filipinas* (1886) or Edgar Talusan Fernandez's *Kahapon, Ngayon at Pangarap* (Yesterday, Today and Hope), 1990, the Filipina body has become standard in representing the country via her inclusion or even her representation as the Philippine flag. Many times these historical works depicted issues from Spanish or American colonization. M.O.B. continues this tradition, but with a less serious undertone. The use of vertical posters also promotes a more eye-catching advertisement. Benoit suggests: "The vertical choice is more popular, as it can be posted just about anywhere . . . [it] is easier to read for the rushing passerby."[64] Through the use of attractive compositions, M.O.B. lays out an interactive and approachable public intervention.

Adding to this easy engagement between artwork and audience is the use of titles in the form of questions. In many of the posters, the question that is continually at stake is not "Have you eaten?" or "Are you entertaining?," but *Do you understand what you are viewing?*, or perhaps, *What are you consuming?* The title *A Public Service Message About Your Private Life* is, thus, more than just a pretense of a public service announcement; it is a public critique on how the media, culture, and society take into

[64] Benoit, 1.

account the stereotypical attributes that stigmatize Filipina American women and also women in general. It is through these titled questions that M.O.B. fights back. The use of language is similar to Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* (1977), which were anonymous messages scattered throughout the urban, institutional, and commercial landscapes of New York; she uses language and text often riddled with sincere, yet subversive messages that help test "our assumptions about society and the role of art today."[65] While Holzer's combination of text and image "started the work as parody,"[66] M.O.B. pairs language with a satirical, visual representation of Filipino American culture. Every poster's accompanying title or caption references not only the theme of the work, but also how it allows for a variety of interactions with and reactions from the viewer. The posters bring to mind one of Holzer's admissions about her emphasis on text in her work: " . . . finally I wound up being more interested in the captions than the drawings. The captions, in a clean, pure way, told you everything."[67] In the case of M.O.B., we have a list of basic questions--posing as movie title billings from afar--that are consistently asked in many homes. They are sincere in their essence and reminiscent of the archetypal nurturing mother or the generous hospitality of an idyllic host. But these simplistic and sincere questions combined with the parodic performances of three Filipina hosts also become a subversive tool.

In the poster "Are you entertaining?," M.O.B. depicts an image of three women, whose gendered roles are, once again, represented through dress and an abundance of

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[65] Waldman, 17.

[66] Ibid., 18.

[67] Jenny Holzer, quoted in Waldman, 18.

flowers and butterflies inside the domestic space. Depicted as taking part in the Filipino and Filipino American ritual of karaoke, they are entertaining not only themselves, but also their public audience on Market Street, by extension. The posters take on the facades of similar movie advertisements in the public streets, but also go further and show an entertaining scene from the series. Behind closed doors, or rather, open windows, Filipina Americans partake in fun and enjoyable events, but with the addition of the title, "Are you entertaining?," M.O.B. reminds the viewer about the proper etiquette for the ideal host. You need to not only have an abundance of food to feed your guests, you also need to be entertaining as well. This ideal is again represented in another poster, "Do you play?," where we see an intimate scene of women and other guests playing a game of mahjong--a game that is constant and almost necessary in many Filipino American parties. The title is given a backdrop of red flowers over-arching a sliding door opening this scene of familiarity to the audience. Here, M.O.B. asks not if we are entertaining, but if we are part of Filipino culture through this inclusion/use of mahjong: *Just how Filipino are you?*

The collective introduces their culture and its stereotypes with a more comical vision. These simplistic and sincere questions combined with the humoristic visions of three Filipina hosts become a subversive tool by using it in this ironic situation. This question/movie title poster takes on another title as the overall caption of each poster. In Holzer's words, captions are the work's truths. But what are these truths then? How can a question as simple and common as "Have you eaten?" be so problematic on a poster? M.O.B. presents their questions as simple, ordinary inquiries that are communicated to their viewer in a neutral voice. There is no overt demand of interaction

with their work, but in this way, the question and the work as a whole introduces one larger probe that comes with further inquiries regarding the situation in which it is asked. Asking such an everyday question allows the commuter to not only answer "yes or no," but introduces other questions: *Why is this poster asking this? What does this poster even mean? Who are these women? Why are they portrayed in this way?* Asking these common questions allows the public viewer to come into contact with the work without having assumptions about its connections to the art world--a part of the cultural society that sometimes has negative implications; As Holzer states, "because the content of writing is taken at face value, it is not dismissed as art."[68] Holzer became fascinated with the ways in which the combination of language and text with the public environment opened up an interactive relationship with her audience, the public.[69] By placing these "truths" throughout the city, her artwork gains visibility and comes into contact with different types of audiences. These questionable captions become a point of interaction between the work and its public; because of the transient nature of the commuter and the open possibilities of street culture, the location of these posters and their questions come into contact with various types of passers-by and will be read in diverse ways.

Conclusion

It is important to address the risk in portraying such embellished and over the top stereotypes to an unassuming and unfamiliar audience, especially in the realms of public art. This work could introduce audience members to new ways of perpetuating stereotypes or overgeneralize an entire population. While M.O.B. may take this risk in

[68] Ibid., 33.

[69] Ibid., 18.

performing these social and racial constructions of what it means to be Filipina American, they do so in a manner that helps critique and problematize these stereotypes with complex imagery and parody to their site-specific audience. In addressing this critique of the subservient hostess in the environment of the San Franciscan commuter, who most likely is not accustomed to being confronted by politicized works of art on a daily basis, the audience has the potential to engage in a dialogue about issues possibly plaguing their community. Opening these issues to the public centers the discourse about Filipina bodies and identities in the public sphere. Most importantly, M.O.B.'s production of Filipina Americans' discourse on identity also produces a much-needed critique designed to dismantle previous colonialist impositions of who and how Filipinas should be. M.O.B.'s art practice delves into performing the nostalgic body of Filipinas with all its stereotypical representations--including the accessories of a foreign accent, un-American mannerisms, and, of course, a shy and submissive demeanor. While these posters may seem attractive because of its familial or funny features, the collective reminds the audience that there is a criticality within their work through this use of parody that can also serve as a transformational process of resistance to such stereotypes even though, at first, the work conjures up the feelings of the motherly Filipina American hostess ready to serve you. The ways in which M.O.B. performs Filipina American identities through the representation of the dutiful and subservient wife, dictated by the clothes she wears, the delicious food she cooks, and the eagerness she has to serve her husband and his guests, displays the tools of parody and joke-making prevalent within Filipino communities that build upon and establish solidarity, protection, and re-contextualization. M.O.B. parodies the familial and expected hospitality of Filipinas by

exaggerating the scene in almost every identifiable characteristic, from the vibrantly colored *ternos* accompanied by an overuse of makeup and hair from the 1980s to the overly excited gestures of feeding the potential guest. It is then, only up to the audience to decide and further question, *Do you know what you are consuming?*

CHAPTER 3

MAIL ORDER BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN

In 2002, M.O.B.'s work went beyond the cinematic façades of their serial posters plastered on public kiosks and finally steps foot into the realms of film with *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein*. The collective takes a twist on the original version of *Bride of Frankenstein* by changing the narrative and making Frankenstein's bride a commodity--a mail order bride. More significantly, they take their cue from more than just this renowned film; they look to advances in technology, as well as the historical and contemporary issues of their namesake, in order to establish a deconstructive view of a cultural taboo. In this chapter, I analyze M.O.B.'s use of parody in connection with Filipino mimicry to depict their multi-layered strategies in addressing a discourse based on the commodification and objectification of women through film and the mail order bride. In addition to Sarita Echavez See's concepts on humor, I also expand on her methodologies about the performative Filipino/a body and the use of Filipino mimicry and imitation to depict the complexity of diasporic Filipina American identities. Once again, M.O.B.'s performative nature displays the transitory and multi-faceted personalities of its members through varying personas that often question how Filipinas and, by extension, Asian Americans are portrayed in film and the media. Another issue addressed is how women are shown as commodities in film. Such objectification of female bodies in film relates directly to the stigma of mail order brides.

M.O.B. personally describes this nuanced film as a "Southern Gothic, neo-noir, pseudo-silent karaoke horror film,"[70] and part of the collective's series in karaoke films. Set to an initial French score and then, quite contrastingly, the "classic feel-good sing-along 'I Hate Myself For Loving You,'" sung by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, the work sets up a scenario of a lonely (and Caucasian) Dr. Frankenstein looking for a soul mate who can serve him and be obedient. Unlike the original film, where Frankenstein is forced to create his own companion, M.O.B.'s Frankenstein is living in the contemporary age of technology where he can search for a bride online and order one just as quickly. He picks out the exact features and characteristics he wants in a wife, who then swiftly shows up in a box, ready to be assembled, just like a toy. Unfortunately for Frankenstein, ordering a perfect bride over the Internet is not as easy as one would think. After being awakened, his first wife, who dons a virtuous white dress with a face full of geisha-like makeup, has a tendency to run away from him, fearing for her life. It ends badly for her; she is dismantled and winds up in a return-to-sender box. Not to be discouraged, Frankenstein sets off to find another bride that is much more suited to his needs. But once again, he finds his second wife too talkative and not subservient enough to measure to his needs first. After sending her back, Frankenstein makes one last purchase; this time, he makes sure to add some final touches to make this bride the perfect companion--he brings her to life the same way he was brought to life. While waiting for his bride, he daydreams that she will be the perfect mail order bride, a subservient, respectful, shy, exotic creature that waits on him hand and foot and gives him pleasure anytime he wants.

[70] "Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein, 2002," Wofflehouse, accessed February 20, 2013, http://wofflehouse.com/mob/mail-order-bride-of-frankenstein/.

But with the life he gives her, she also has a mind of her own accompanied by a fierce personality that is not afraid of defying male authority. Quickly, the pace of the pseudo-silent film's French score is drastically changed to the hard female rock and roll beat of Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, which increasingly mimics the bride's violent actions. It becomes apparent that the "Mail Order Bride" of Frankenstein does not want to smother him with adoration, but just smother him. The violence escalates until the Bride of Frankenstein becomes his ex-wife as she shuts the door, leaving the return-to-sender box with his unwanted companionship.

Filipino Mimicry

In the original "Bride of Frankenstein," the macabre storyline focuses less on the Bride and more on the heinous schemes of Dr. Pretorius as he manipulates Dr. Frankenstein in creating a new companion for his beloved Monster. An unwilling Dr. Frankenstein reluctantly concedes to his former partner's wishes, while simultaneously the audience views the hatred the Monster receives in his daily life. Ultimately, once the Bride is created and comes to life, she too reacts badly to the Monster's need for friendship. In the end, the Monster realizes Dr. Frankenstein's initial acknowledgement of his degradation of human life and death; he does not belong to this life. In M.O.B.'s version, they add on to the parody by subtracting the Monster from the film and emphasizing Dr. Frankenstein's fetish for necromancy. There is no longer a victimized Elizabeth to help aid him back to health, but a pre-packaged "Love, Made-to-Order" bride. Instead of harvesting and producing body parts, Frankenstein is now purchasing robotic humans through a catalog and Internet company--apparently, love has a price tag. One significant aspect that the trio keeps is the reluctance--if not hatred or fear--that the

Brides have for the men who created them. In this rebellion, the viewer begins to see M.O.B.'s parodic representation of "one of the greatest horror films of all time."[71]

Much of the acting displayed throughout the film brings to mind the often times overly dramatized scenes in Filipino cinema. In Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns' work, she describes the use of the word *"maarte"* in Filipino culture and its connection with her theories on Filipina performative bodies through the idea of *"puro arte."* Traditionally, as San Pablo Burns describes it, if your actions as a woman in Filipino culture are announced or deciphered as *"puro arte,"* that not only literally translates to "putting on a show," but also "questions one's veracity and authenticity."[72] What is often considered a negative statement cast on a younger woman's actions and body by another member of the community is reconstructed by San Pablo Burns as a term that gives Filipina bodies an almost foreshowing and inevitable relationship with the performative and attention-seeking, creative body. San Pablo Burns states:

> . . . to be *puro arte* is to strategically refuse unmediated or clear-cut expression. The invocation of *puro arte* also carries an acknowledgement, almost as admirable recognition, of the theatrics at play. Putting on a show calls for an awareness of the labor of artful expression, of the creative efforts required to make something out of nothing . . . .[73]

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[71] "The Bride of Frankenstein (1935)," filmsite, accessed August 2014, http://www.filmsite.org/bride.html.

[72] Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stage of Empire* (New York City: NYU Press, 2012), 1.

[73] Ibid.

She also quotes writer Glecy Atienza's translation of being *maarte* as Filipinas "overreacting precisely because there are things [they] could not say."[74] And in its essence as a gesture of theatricality, *puro arte* also places "emphasis on the labor of theatricality . . . mined here for its potentialities in alternative forms of political and cultural expression . . . . To be *puro arte* is to take risks in forms of political and artistic participation."[75] That is what M.O.B. emphasizes in *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein*.

The fact that these three women use their own bodies through performative gestures to indicate the laboring Filipina and Filipina American body as differing and parodic brides is a political statement addressing how women are depicted on screen versus their intersectional realities. The ways in which M.O.B. uses their own female bodies in the media of film is reminiscent of artist Cindy Sherman's work, whose series of untitled movie stills question the stereotypes in casting and depicting female personas on the silver screen. Like Sherman, M.O.B. place themselves within their artwork, acting as actresses, models, producers, screenwriters, photographers, and other professionals undertaking of their artistic production. Unlike Hollywood films, these women are in control of how they are depicted and portrayed. The film is, however, more than a performative gesture because it constitutes another display of the transitory nature of M.O.B.; these women take on the roles of both Frankenstein's mail order brides *and* the progressive and reconstructed version of an M.O.B. mail order bride. San Pablo Burns states, "The very term 'Filipino/a performing body' is a mobilized indicator of both embodied representations of 'Filipinos' and of Filipino/a performance practices on

[74] Glecy Atienza, quoted in San Pablo Burns, 2.

[75] San Pablo Burns, 2.

various theatrical and political stages."[76] Through the performing Filipina and Filipina American bodies like M.O.B., Burns also introduces how *puro arte* is related to a revised version of Filipino mimicry. What was once a negative and derogatory term related to Filipinos' ability to assimilate or capture another culture's influence is now reintroduced by Burns as a performative political agenda. M.O.B. takes on the tropes of what is thought to be what constitutes mail order brides and brings them to the silver, or rather, black screen.

In nature, mimicry is an evolutionary characteristic in animals or plants that resemble another inanimate object or animal, and such mimicry is used as a form of defense.[77] In this thesis, I discuss Filipino mimicry, which is similar to that of the original meaning where Filipinos mimic another culture in order to assimilate, survive, and even fight back. Mimicry in Filipino history, or what has been written about in regards to Filipino history, can sometimes describe the culture as somewhat submissive to those of a dominant power due to the fact that Filipinos are unable to produce original or innovative thinking.[78] I use Burns' description of mimicry as a way to analyze M.O.B.'s strategies in punning and parody. I follow Burns' theories in her book to link

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[76] Ibid., 3.

[77] "Nature Wildlife: Mimicry," BBC, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/adaptations/Mimicry.

[78] San Pablo Burns discusses how past historians and anthropologists Arthur Stanely Riggs and Albert Ernest Jenks described Filipino-s and their theater as lacking in originality and inventiveness, but they were very good in mimicking other cultures and assimilating into their new colonizer's society, see San Pablo Burns, 10, and Vicente Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 45.

the strategies of mimicry and parody to her reinterpretation of *puro arte*. M.O.B. remakes and mimics a new version of *The Bride of Frankenstein* as their own through parodic additions of mail order brides to insert a political statement into a historically known Hollywood horror film. They use film's entertaining characteristics as a vehicle to promote social issues concerning how the female Filipino body is portrayed and received in film and reality. By mimicking the original background story and the silent film noir tone, but adding humorous new characters, contrasting soundtracks, and new character depictions, M.O.B. introduces its viewers to a nuanced, more multi-leveled version of Frankenstein and his bride.

Film Noir Karaoke

M.O.B.'s description of their film as 'psuedo-silent karaoke film' introduces the audience from the very beginning to their sardonic representation of the original sequel. The artists turned an originally renowned horror film featuring a pair of evil protagonists, who set to create a perfect mate for a monster, into a karaoke film, which highlights one man's attempt in buying a new partner--an attempt that ends in his demise and the rise of the female protagonist. Understood as a large part of Filipino culture, karaoke videos accompanied by sing-along verses and instrumentals are a common fixture within many homes, restaurants, and events in the Philippines and their diasporic communities abroad. Karaoke, a Japanese term that translates to "empty orchestra," became popular during the 1970s when KTVs or Karaoke Televisions were invented and allowed for easy access to sing at home or a local venue.[79] As a very popular pastime in the Philippines, karaoke is

[79] Casey M.K. Lum, *In Search of a Voice: Karaoke and the Construction of Identity in Chinese America* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1.

viewed just as seriously as it is enjoyed; for example, a recent controversy over singing a particular Frank Sinatra track of "My Way" created such a heated and dangerous response from karaoke audiences and participants that many venues were forced to take the track off their lists.[80] Zhou Xun and Francesca Tarocco, who wrote *Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon*, highlight the significance of karaoke in the Philippine culture:

> To many Filipinos, karaoke is so fundamental to their life that owning a karaoke machine is far more important than having a toilet in their own home . . . . Most homes have hardly anything apart from a few mattresses. A karaoke machine, however, is almost always in sight--singing to their hearts' content is the only way many Filipinos have to relieve life's misery.[81]

Karaoke's presence within the culture is so dominant that many politicians and companies choose to mainstream the use of karaoke as a way to sell products and the overall Philippine brand to other countries.[82] Even in America today, many Filipino American restaurants hold permanent karaoke set-ups for their weekly karaoke night(s).[83]

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[80] "Sinatra Song Often Strikes Deadly Chord," *The New York Times*, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/07/world/asia/07karaoke.html?_r=0.

[81] Zhou Xun and Francesca Torraco, *Karaoke: The Global Phenomenon* (Clerkenwell: Reaktion Books, 2007), 77.

[82] Xun and Tarocco describe how former President Gloria Arroyo personally thanked Korean based karaoke company Enter Tech Corp. for their decision to invest in the Philippines due to its strong ties to karaoke. The two authors also discuss how the Department of Tourism and In-A-Jiffy Enterprise used karaoke as a way to spread tourism through their "Sing with the Philippines' Magic Singing Package, which comprises famous scenes in the Philippines that have been immortalized in song accompanied by the appropriate video footage," (77).

[83] This claim can easily be substantiated by doing a quick search throughout Yelp's website to find Filipino restaurants in the Southern and Northern California area that have karaoke set-ups and stages for these weekly nights.

In the book, "In Search of a Voice: Karaoke and the Construction of Identity in Chinese America," Casey Man Kong Lum states that karaoke is a form of technology communication that has advanced our contemporary society's way of relating to one another.[84] This form of technology communication is just another in a long list of previous forms of communication, for example, writing, reading, or other ways to preserve and spread information and ideas. Lum also states that progressive new forms of technology communication can also "help define or redefine how people relate among themselves."[85] With different forms of communication also come embedded power relations: "Socially constructed gender roles are implicated in the conception, development, and use of communication technology."[86] Xun and Tarocco also introduce various new guides, courses, and television programs on "how-to" karaoke properly. For example, *Josei Seven,* a gossip magazine targeted to middle-aged housewives, featured a 'Ten Commandments' of karaoke: "(6.) Avoid singing sexy songs, which are likely to offend senior office ladies; (8.) Wear a suit rather than a sexy dress out of respect for senior office ladies; and (9.) When not singing, be sure to maintain an awareness of and express an interest in those around you."[87] In another magazine, women were also instructed on how they should look performing, i.e., poses that

[84] Lum, 4-5.

[85] Lum, 4.

[86] Lum, 5.

[87] Xun and Tarocco, 42-43.

emphasized their femininity, while men were instructed to hold bolder stances.[88] While karaoke culture in the Philippines and, Filipino American culture in the United States, which may be less rigid than its continental counterparts, there exists an underlying social understanding; when someone takes the microphone, even for a few minutes, they take center stage, and it is his or her time to shine.

In M.O.B.'s film, karaoke is renegotiated as a term that reflects the current scene's mood--its instrumental emotions that moves the audience to the edge of their seats. The pseudo-silent film aspect in regards to the karaoke status of the film is quite a stark contrast, but is set in the same parodic style of M.O.B.'s past, present, and future works. While the audience is informed of Frankenstein's actions and thoughts via text on the screen, they are also informed of the characters' feelings and mood through the music being played and, eventually, the lyrics of Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. Jean Sablon's French score of *Vous Qui Passez Sans Me Voir* sets the beginning of the film's happy-go-lucky tone as Frankenstein excitedly picks his future bride on screen; the music then starts to pick up as one after another of his brides proves imperfect to his tastes. Finally, we hear the loud and very contrasting sounds of the rock and roll voices and instruments of Jett and the Blackhearts blasting through the scene, just as the last bride is awakened. Frankenstein's terror is awakened at the same time as we hear Jett repeatedly sing, "I hate myself for loving you," on and on and on. With every drumbeat and every strike of the guitars playing, the audience sees a progressing and rising protagonist in the final Bride as she tears throughout the castle terrorizing her unwanted groom until she finally kicks him out--stamping out a "love don't live here no more" placard on the door

[88] Ibid.

just as the last beat ends. As the credits roll, the mood changes quickly once again to a cheerful French score of *Parlez-Moi d'Amour* by Lucienne Boyer, and it becomes clear that the protagonist, who is now the Bride, achieves what Frankenstein never could: she is happy with her life.

M.O.B. uses karaoke as a way to introduce a change in the tone of the original *Bride of Frankenstein* by adding modern music and also a contemporary female personality; the mail order bride of Frankenstein is no longer submissive or meek, but strong enough to push through her role as a secondary background character to become the main character. The addition of karaoke in the pseudo-silent film recreates the solemnity of film noir into a parodic representation of one man's failed attempt at an Internet purchase only to find that money can't buy you love and that women are not to be undermined and objectified.

M.O.B.'s use of karaoke can also be related to mimicry. In the Philippines, being able to properly execute any diva or Frank Sinatra ballad perfectly, sans Filipino accent, is an acclaimed talent. Instead of using their voices to imitate the emotions and bravado of the singer, the Brides and Frankenstein use actions to engage in an entertaining, but critiquing performance of this "mating" experience. The gestures and performances of each character prove significant in revealing how each stereotype of the mail order bride and her suitor is displayed in the broader arena of television and film.

Analysis of Characters

In an article from the Race Relations column of the website About, writer Nadra Kareem Nittle makes a case for Asian American representation in film and television.[89] Nittle states that according to the United States Census Bureau, Asian Americans were the fastest growing communities during the decade of 2000-2010,[90] yet, according to the Screen Actor's Guild, Asian American representation in film and television was only 3.8 percent[91]--one of the lowest percentages of representation.[92] Ironically, stereotypical forms of representation run rampant in portrayals of Asian Americans. Nittle characterizes depictions for Asian Americans in the following five categories: Dragon Ladies, Kung Fu Fighters, Geeks, Foreigners, and, last but certainly not least, Prostitutes.[93] She goes on to describe the pseudo-essential characteristics of each category: Dragon Ladies, who were popularized by the typecasting of 1920s actress Anna May Wong, were villainous beauties; Kung Fu Fighters were made famous by Chinese juggernaut Bruce Lee; Geeks were savvy, but submissive people; Foreigners are

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[89] Nadra Kareem Nittle, "Five Common Asian American Stereotypes in TV and Film," About.com Race Relations, accessed October 31, 2014, http://racerelations.about.com /od/hollywood/a/Five-Common-Asian-american-Stereotypes-In-Tv-And-Film.htm.

[90] This is a statistic from the U.S. Census Bureau and reported by the National Public Radio; "U.S. Census Show Asians Are Fastest Growing Racial Group," NPR, last accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/03/23/14 9244806/u-s-census-show-asians-are-fastest-growing-racial-group.

[91] "Shattering Asian American Stereotypes," SAG AFTRA, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.sagaftra.org/shattering-asian-american-stereotypes.

[92] Nittle.

[93] Ibid.

shown as those who are unable to fit into a successful assimilated life, and therefore are often portrayed as characters at the brunt of the joke with funny accents and odd mannerisms; and, lastly, prostitutes or sex workers, including mail order brides, are depicted in popular media since the 1960s and 1970s due to the United States' involvement in Asia with multiple wars since the beginning of the 20th century.[94] Nittle takes into account the realization of these type-cast characters through the voices of the actors and actresses themselves. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1933, Wong describes her angst towards the roles that made her famous and her inevitable move to Europe: "I was so tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that the screen Chinese is nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain--murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass. We are not like that."[95] Instead of a heterogeneous mix of complex characters and personalities that fully represent a continent, which inhabits thousands of different ethnicities and races, the portrayal of the Asian person is broken down and reduced into a handful of flat, sidelined characters. Nittles' article is just one example of Asian and Asian American typecasting in the throngs that is the Internet. From various Asian American actors' ongoing interviews about breaking the boundaries of tokenism to Asian-centric activist and community blogs, such as Angry Asian Man, there is no doubt there is a need to deconstruct and add complexity to Asian identities within film. It is, then, no coincidence that M.O.B. uses many stereotypical

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Edward Sakomoto, "Anna May Wong and the Dragon-lady Syndrome," *The Los Angeles Times*, accessed October 31, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-07-12/entertainment/ca-3279_1_dragon-lady.

representations of the exotic and fearful Asian woman within the context of their first karaoke film, *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein*.

M.O.B. introduces its audience to a varied amount of characters throughout this film: Frankenstein, his multiple wives, and even a cameo by a hunch-backed mailman. Frankenstein, who originally created a monster, is thusly depicted *as* a monster. It does not escape the narrative of M.O.B.'s new version of this film that although he is portrayed as a somewhat lonely, mad scientist, he is still portrayed by a Caucasian actor; his role as an imperialist is implicated through his physical attributes, much less his actions, and therefore, takes on the familiar body of the white male suitor whose bride is just as much a pre-packaged Filipina as her historically colonized native country, the Philippines.

The display of the first two rejected Brides introduces the audience to the cascade of stereotypical mail order bride characteristics. In the film, the audience comes across the Brides splayed out on the pages of a mail order bride catalogue that Frankenstein ponders as he makes his first choices on his journey to find his perfect bride. From the very beginning we are introduced to the Brides as objectified fragments to pick and choose from a magazine catalogue--from her hair to her limbs, a woman's body is just an object to be possessed by the male protagonist. What Frankenstein fails to understand, however, are the personalities that come with the soon to be assembled Brides he has ordered. Stereotypically the stigma of the "mail order bride" comes with many representations as obedient, submissive, exotic, and, often times, unassimilated foreign persons. In M.O.B.'s first two versions of the mail order bride, we see exaggerated and parodied characteristics in these representations. Where one bride is too docile and

fearful, M.O.B. introduces a bride that is too talkative. From these exaggerated characters, the audience witnesses Frankenstein's reprehension towards his purchases.

The third and final Bride takes on the role of an authority and shares a similarity to the Monster in the original film. She takes it upon herself to take control of the situation and finally set Dr. Frankenstein free. Unlike a benevolent Monster who lets Frankenstein and future bride go and live on, M.O.B.'s last bride chooses to dispose of him in the same fashion he is accustomed to disposing of his brides. This bride changes Frankenstein's Romanesque castle from a patriarchal fort to a matriarchal fortress. M.O.B., thus, introduces an entirely new version of a mail order bride, one that is anti-submissive and independent; she does not scream out of fear when Frankenstein touches her, but yells to show Frankenstein and the audience her awesome power. Bonnie Zare and S. Lily Mendoza, in "Mail Order Brides in Popular Culture: Colonialist Representations and Absent Discourse," discuss the lack of complexity in representations of mail order brides in literature and world media:

> Women involved in contemporary agency-arranged marriages rarely are shown as courageous, despite their bravery in being willing to travel and set up home in an unfamiliar place away from family and friends . . . . Many times these wives have to find courage to confront their own family's disapproval of their marrying a 'stranger' and/or their in-laws' suspicion of them as gold diggers or as coming from a culture perceived as 'backward.'[96]

While M.O.B.'s film may involve humor in portraying an overzealous Frankenstein in his journey on finding the perfect submissive bride, the audience is also given the view of a different type of bride in each scene--ultimately leading towards a bride of enough

[96] Bonnie Zare and S. Lily Mendoza, "Mail Order Brides in Popular Culture: Colonialist Representations and Absent Discourse," *International Journal of Culture* 15 (2012): 370.

strength to overpower her "maker." Many of the realities of the women that decide, or rather, are forced to take a part in the mail order bride business are ones laced in poverty. With a lack of opportunities in their homelands, finding work or arrangements outside of the country is necessary for a better life for oneself and the families they have left behind. Zare and Mendoza explain:

> The Philippine government, saddled with debt and failing in its own responsibility to create jobs for its citizens, has hailed these women as the nation's 'new economic heroes' owing to the monetary remittances that these women are able to send back. These 'servants of globalization' are thus being used to exculpate the nation's inaction.[97]

These brides are simultaneously heralded for their help in supporting their homeland's government, while continuously being denigrated for their choices to help as 'servants' to their homeland by becoming a contractually obligated wife to a foreigner. Zare and Mendoza add:

> As we examine popular culture's repeated negative images of women in these marriages, we need to question the perpetuation of narrow images of the females involved, images that do not take into account their complex subjectivities and the push-pull factors within the predatory logic of the global capitalist economy that drives such women to risk what is normally the default security of home and country for an unknown future in a foreign land.[98]

What Zare and Mendoza emphasize is the need to recognize the hardships that most, if not all, mail order brides face not only in their homelands, but also in their future homes when they make, or are compelled to make, the decision to leave. To become a mail order bride is a decision that is not taken lightly, and there are dire situations that lead up to this decision.

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[97] Ibid., 378.

[98] Ibid.

In terms of M.O.B.'s last mail order bride character, the audience does not get a chance to see the circumstances that led her to her fate as the Bride of Frankenstein because she is handpicked and assembled by Frankenstein via a catalogue. Although Zare and Mendoza critique the ways in which there is a lack of acknowledging and representing the background and situations of mail order brides, what the audience is not witnessing in M.O.B.'s lack of representation is purposeful. Instead of portraying a bride's background, which could be a childhood of poverty and the inevitable selling of herself to a foreign bidder, the film centers on Frankenstein's need to objectify and commodify the (Asian) female persona. M.O.B.'s *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein* is not so much about the victimization of Asian brides as it is about how patriarchal society has objectified and demonized mail order brides. The critique is launched in relation to the traditional notion of how a patriarchal society praises a man for spreading his seed, while a woman is expected to remain virginal. The irony in this case is that Frankenstein's bride is so virginal, since he chose a newly assembled bride right out of a catalogue; she is not demonized, thus, until he touches her.

Much like M.O.B.'s exaggerated use of "geisha" make-up in *A Public Message for Your Private Life* (1998), they once again take this same form of parody in the representation of the brides' exotic physical features. The physical portrayal of each bride again references M.O.B.'s use of drag to depict, mock, and critique the stereotypical representation of what the mail order bride from overseas should look like. In her analysis of M.O.B.'s work, *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride,* author Gina Velasco describes the trio's use of the performative nature and strategy of drag as a form of feminist camp, which seeks to verge away from the traditionally white-homosexual

man's agenda in order to move towards the issues of queer-female minorities.[99] In M.O.B.'s case, this expands from queer-female minorities towards the fetishized bodies of Filipina and Filipina American minorities. Velasco writes, "The term 'feminist camp' refers to the Mail Order Brides' use of the hyperbolic aesthetic of camp to foreground and critique the forms of gendered and racialized labor performed by third-world women."[100] The use of overtly white foundation, black streaks of eyebrow liner, and deep red smudges produces the stereotypical representation of the *Oriental*: skin as white as snow, cherry red lips, and black almond-shaped eyes. But this overuse of makeup falters when each bride is portrayed with exaggerated facial expressions of fear, over-attentiveness, and anger. Zare and Mendoza also discuss the fetishization of the Asian female body: "The emphasis on cross-racial marriage lends credence to our claim that Orientalist fetishism and colonialist and sexist fantasies play a major role in the saliency of such cross-national marriages."[101] Here, we see a quick reference to the problems with the mail order bride business and human sex trafficking in parts of the world like the Philippines. In short, the primary reasoning for these courtships and contractual agreements are based on the stereotypical objectification of Asian women as 'Oriental' and exotic beauties that prescribe to the foreigner's projected needs and wants.

Frankenstein's need to replace and re-order new and exotic brides demonstrates the interchangeable characteristic of the third-world laboring female body.

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[99] Gina Velasco, "Performing the Filipina 'Mail Order Bride'," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (2013): 2, accessed September 2014, doi: 10.1080/ 0740770X.2013.849064.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Zare and Mendoza, 377.

Like M.O.B.'s previous works, the characters are dressed similarly, which presents the audience with women who are identical in physical features and laboring abilities. By combining the drag elements of intense makeup with exaggerated facial expressions, M.O.B. depicts a contradictory situation where the brides look almost interchangeable with one another, but come in various types of personalities; just because Frankenstein chose them on the Internet, there is no such thing as a perfect mail order (*Oriental*) bride. The brides' actions also are parodied, especially those of the last bride. In an ironic twist, she is domineering and powerful, precisely the type of bride Frankenstein did *not* want. By portraying the mail order bride in such a sinister, yet humorous way, M.O.B. tries to break down the stereotypes of the idyllic, shy, and subservient Filipina bride. In doing so, they mimic the same irony that is in their namesake; the bride of Frankenstein becomes a mob by herself and throws out her tyrannical master in order to break free of his expectations and oppressions.

Pedagogy

In a pedagogical aspect, M.O.B. continues to spread awareness over the homogenous stereotype of Filipinas and the mail order bride through the use of different medias, such as film and karaoke. By using film, M.O.B. potentially opens up to a broader audience that is unaware of the stigmas placed on Filipinas because of their country's history and current system of mail order brides--a process similar to the use of public posters in *A Private Message for Your Public Life*. In the same sense, this film also has an entertaining quality that attracts an audience who would not necessarily go to a museum or seek out work that is specifically tied to Filipinas and Filipina American bodies.

In Roots' anthology *Filipino Americans: Transformation and Identity*, Raquel Z. Ordoñez discusses the complexity of the reality of mail order brides in her essay "Mail-Order Brides: An Emerging Community." Although there are rampant articles and stories about victimized and abused brides throughout the World, Ordoñez writes about the more positive outcomes of some of these mail order brides and, thus, adds complexity to this traditionally denigrated situation.[102] Many of these brides and their grooms have found success in their relationships, so much so that they are contributing to the bustling online mail order bride business industry.

In more recent news, documentarian Debbie Lum's work, "Seeking Asian-Female," looks into the world of finding a mail order (Asian) bride. While Lum's documentary takes on a familiar theme of one white man's journey for yellow fever, what occurs throughout the film is less stereotypically played out than expected as Lum is forced to break down the fourth wall and become part of the cast when she acts as a therapist for the leading man, Steven, and his new bride, Sandy. Much like M.O.B.'s brides of Frankenstein, the audience witnesses many different types of personality traits in differing brides--Sandy is no different when she is the obedient bride who cooks for her husband, but also has a darker side that contributes to frustrating scenes with Steven unable to address their language barriers.[103] M.O.B. simultaneously responds to this ongoing industry and also critiques the stereotypes that arise due to its popularity and

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[102] Raquel Z. Ordoñez, "Mail-Order Brides: An Emerging Community," in *Filipino Americans: Transformation and Identity*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications): 121.

[103] *Seeking Asian-Female*, DVD, directed by Debbie Lum (2012. Debbie Lum).

presence in the virtual world. The use of the Internet plays a large role in the contemporary Mail Order Bride industry. The easy-accessibility of the Internet for finding a potential bride is a very modern and globalized situation. Not only has the presence of an online community within the Mail-Order Bride industry sky-rocketed since the advent of Internet and technologies that make it easier to meet and talk to people globally, there are also voices within the community discussing and advocating their relationships to outsiders. In multiple articles, many husbands recount their personal experiences and relationships on different social platforms and media sites.[104] One of the main articles released in 2012 by *Orange Coast Magazine* lists a then sixty-three year old Caucasian man promoting the tales of a forlorn geriatric divorcee and his quest of venturing out to the Philippines to bring his potential and foreign fiancé, Ivy, to Orange County.[105] Fortunately for the couple, who met on *Filipinaheart*, things may have worked out, despite strange looks from neighbors and family members. Ironically, *Filipinaheart*, which is based in Cebu City, Philippines, was found by the Philippine government to be an illegal human trafficking company and it was shut down immediately in 2013.[106] While these husbands may have brought the issue of mail order

[104] Mae Ryan, "Imported Brides Share the Ups and Downs of Settling in America," Southern California Public Radio, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.scpr. org/programs/offramp/2012/09/26/28576/imported-filipino-brides-settle-into-love-in-south/?slide=4.

[105] David Haldane, "My Imported Bride," *Orange Coast Magazine*, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.orangecoast.com/features/imported-bride/.

[106] Rouchelle R. Dinglasan, "Authorities Bust Mail-Order Bride Syndicate in Cebu," GMA News Online, accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/346657/news/regions/authorities-bust-mail-order-bride-syndicate-in-cebu.

brides into the limelight, the reality of the mail order bride industry as a form of human trafficking holds serious implications and potential risks for all parties in terms of sexual and domestic abuse.

Conclusion

One significant part of this film is the inclusion of a customizable bride via magazine catalogue or Internet purchase. M.O.B.'s addition of the mail order bride is one that should not be taken lightly. Although the film depicts Frankenstein's humorously failed, but ardent attempts at finding love through the Internet, the use of the commodified Asian body does not escape the viewer; this is especially highlighted during the sound change of a flowing French score to a hard rock n' roll beat. When M.O.B. introduces its last bride as a strong and powerful counterpart to her woe-begotten sisters, they also introduce the complexity that is the mail order bride and the circumstances that have created this economic source of survival. On being asked about how M.O.B. has changed since its early works versus this 2003 film, Wofford's response is clear: "The objectification of women still hasn't really stopped."[107] Recreating a timeless horror film and adding a punning title, whose namesake is related to the idea of the globally commodified female, is M.O.B.'s way of critiquing these issues through a humor that bites.

Through the media of filmmaking, M.O.B. helps to reposition the identities of Filipinas, Filipina Americans, or Asian mail order bride into a better light, while also providing their audience with an entertaining, yet critical medium for viewing and

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[107] Mail Order Brides/M.O.B., Interview by Mary Grace Sanchez, San Francisco, California, April 2014.

addressing these stereotypes and situations. Much like the previously stated work of M.O.B., *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein* uses many techniques of parody to create contradictory scenes and ambiguous narratives in order to break down the stereotypes and stigma of Filipinas and mail order bride identities. From the beginning, the exaggerated movements and actions, specifically the scenes in which Frankenstein picks his brides' characteristics, are mimicked from traditional silent movies to get certain messages across; in this case, Frankenstein was eager to choose and order his idealized mail order bride. Such exaggerated actions present Frankenstein not only as an overly eager husband to be, but also a consumer obsessed over his commodity, which happens to be a human being. In this way, M.O.B. comments on how the role of Filipina American identities are implicated into the "context of the millions of Filipinas on whose bodies the Philippine economy is being built and sustained."[108] Through this subject of the mail order bride, the collective is providing a critique on how the mail order bride business is one of the economic supporting features of the Philippine country. With mail order brides being taken from their country and, in most cases, married to wealthy foreign men, they are able to send money back to the Philippines and help their homeland's economy.[109] This system enables the women to get out of their homeland, but it also commodifies them and affects and stigmatizes how others view women of the same ethnicity. By creating this exaggeration in Frankenstein's actions, M.O.B. tries to bring

[108] San Pablo Burns, 212.

[109] Federico V. Magdelena, *Misusing the Internet: The Case of Filipino Mail Order Brides*, Hawaii University, accessed March 12, 2013, http://www.hawaii.edu /cps/pinay-mob.html.

attention to his dehumanizing act of commodifying Filipina bodies and also the stigma that can be tied to every other Filipina.

In *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein*, M.O.B. moves into the media of film and karaoke as a way to address their namesake through a reconstruction of the original 1935 film, *The Bride of Frankenstein*. While the original film focuses on the male protagonist and his monster, M.O.B.'s version emphasizes on the female roles that create a new heroine. The collective tries to break away from the traditional ideas of what a mail order bride or Filipina American should be in order to give the audience re-contextualized versions of Filipina Americans as powerhouses. Through the representation of Frankenstein's last bride, and his inevitable undoing at her hands, M.O.B. portrays the need to move back into a matriarchal society reminiscent of historic Filipina leaders, such as Gabriela Silang or the honorable Baybaylan leaders of pre-colonial eras. M.O.B. produces a film where patriarchy no longer oppresses women, or subjects them to stereotypical roles and identities. Much like any work featuring and critiquing racial and gender stereotypes, there are always risks in introducing and assimilating these stereotypes to society, but the characterization of the last bride's actions provide a stark contrast to the stigmatized mail order bride. By displaying this need to re-contextualize Filipinas and the stigmas that plague their identities, M.O.B.'s work serves to empower Filipina Americans and advise the audience that this can only happen if they become critical readers and re-evaluate their accepted knowledge of Filipina identities and Filipino culture.

M.O.B. CONCLUSION

Since 1998, Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. has developed a body of work that stems from their experiences as a diverse trio of Filipina American artists. Through an analysis of their first poster series for the San Francisco Arts Commission, *A Public Message for Your Private Life* (1998) to their first karaoke film, *Mail Order Bride of Frankenstein* (2003), I have shown how M.O.B. continues to expand upon the discourse of the issues that surround Filipina and Filipina American communities. Not only does the collective venture into everyday and marginalized feminist subjects, they also permeate the different boundaries of art mediums--ranging from public poster art, to karaoke films, and with their most recent work *Manananggoogle* (2013) to Internet conglomerations. The strategies that M.O.B. engages in are also linked with Filipino culture. These include how M.O.B. uses these tools of parody and criticality to perform and problematize the idealization and realities of Filipina and Filipina American identities.

It is important to note that my research is ongoing. With their recent and upcoming work *Manananggoogle* (2013), M.O.B. delves into the media of the Internet and, by extension, the "Tech World." They move into another public realm that is all at once physical and virtual, but also contrastingly local and global. Here, M.O.B. further introduces their audience to more difficulties regarding the marginalization and representation of Filipino artworks by Filipina American artists. Through this work, they are continuing their participation in performing identities to explore various issues within

Filipina and Filipina American communities. In the process, they introduce a whole new series of questions related to their work: What does it mean to still produce works that touches upon identity politics or identities in the 21st Century when art history and the art world went through this in the early 1990s? What is the accountability for marginalized minority artists in the art world referencing cultural histories in their work? How do artists go about targeting and deconstructing issues relating to their identities when their potential public audiences are not fully equipped with the historical contexts that these works are refuting or referencing?

With these new sets of questions, M.O.B.'s role within the art and Filipino American communities is ongoing; their work continues to revolve around the performative aspect of identity in order to explore its fluid and (de)constructive nature. In this way, M.O.B.'s oeuvre is an accumulation of the (female) marginalized bodies within the communities they are members of and take reference from. The strategies they engage with--parody and satire--are tools of understanding, deconstruction, and reconstruction and are related to, if not directly taken from, the historical context of the Filipino and Filipino American culture. By using tools of parody and satire, M.O.B. brings the issues of Filipina and Filipina American to the forefront of art historical discourse.

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