

BOOK REVIEW

**Paul W. Mathews. (2010). *Asian Cam Models: Digital Virtual Virgin Prostitutes?*
Quezon City: Giraffe Books. 166 pages.**

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Paul W. Mathews' *Asian Cam Models: Digital Virtual Virgin Prostitutes?* examines an Internet-mediated business that, as he portrays, employs and economically exploits mostly young, poor, unskilled, and uneducated Filipinas, including transwomen [male-to-female transsexuals], collectively known as Asian/adult cam models (ACMs). Though there have been earlier studies about "interactive, mutual/reciprocal chat sites, where participants are unpaid" (p. 114), it seems that nobody else has yet ventured into analyzing the intricacies of a commercial sex site and its symbiosis with the larger environment. This gives this book a pioneering edge.

The author adopts online ethnography to explore ACM sites, particularly the site known as *AsianPlaymates*. The book reveals how an ACM chat site operates, as well as other details about "ACM-ing" and the social stigma attached to the work. It also analyzes the characteristics of the male customers of ACMs. Finally, the book examines the ACM industry's labor relations and use of a pre-industrial piece-rate system, as well as how it has evolved through glocalization or the interaction between global and local forces that produces mutual benefits.

Asian Cam Models weaves the ACM industry into the broader tapestry of a capitalist market economy where Filipino women serve as both workers and commodities. The industry's affluent western roots and the Internet's globalizing role in tapping the resources of the Philippines highlight the socio-economic divide between and among cultures. Beyond engaging in and earning from the cyber trading of sexuality with men from rich countries where English is the native language, ACMs also face social ostracism as sex workers. Though their work may seem like prostitution, pornography, and stripping, in so far as receiving money and business illegitimacy are concerned, ACM-ing is still distinct from them, for it provides intangible sexual services only after a client pays for a private show. With Marxist and feminist insights, Mathews presents the ACM

industry as a product of modern capitalism that uses technology and lopsided socio-cultural and economic conditions to preserve the status quo by reinforcing labor exploitation and social and gender inequalities.

As Mathews demonstrates, the ACMs normally receive very low or zero income due to accrued debts and unpaid hours spent waiting for and/or chatting with potential paying clients. He also points out that though having more paying clients and/or running their own studios will enable ACMs to earn more money, they will also increase the profits of the foreign Internet service provider (ISP) behind sites like *AsianPlaymates*. Likewise, they would probably impose the same rules and remuneration scheme applied by their previous employers. Certainly, they will end up exploiting other Filipinas.

Asian Cam Models definitely contains valuable information, which can be overwhelming occasionally. Amidst other interesting details, the book offers research areas for other social scientists and scholars to pursue, such as the effects of globalization on traditional socio-sexual roles (p. 59), how geo-demographic sites like Taguig and Angeles City have become havens for ACMs (p. 152), and psycho-cultural perspectives of the models (p. 157). The data on commercial sex chat sites would interest gender advocates, labor experts, and policy makers and could lead them to reflect on their moral stance concerning online and offline sex workers. Even if illegal and detested by conservative sectors, they do—as Mathews points out—provide alternative jobs to struggling women (and men).

The book notes that ACMs who can endure the job are either those able to meet their quota and like the attention or feeling of being sexually desired, or those who say they have no other choice due to lack of income and accrued debts to their employer. However, the women who voluntarily chose to do “ACM-ing” or who thought that they had no other choice for employment may not represent other ACMs whom the author did not encounter. With thousands of ACMs, it is still likely that some could be trafficked victims pressured to stay and to do the job, as well as barred from confessing the truth to anyone.

In refuting what other people think of as a lucrative business, Mathews exonerates the studio boss and the foreign ISP from exploiting ACMs by opining that “It is Philippine society that structures the exploitation of its own people” (p. 100) and that it is the “...cultural immorality of the Philippines that allows such exploitative labour relations—relations determined by bosses who are often other women” (p. 145). Yet, the technology and the business itself have

been primarily spurred by western capitalists who feed on the country's human capital to accumulate profits, regardless of cultural repercussions. With their joint resources, foreign ISPs and their local agents operate studios that breathe life to the ACM industry. It is saddening though that most bosses are also women, but their genitalia are not behind their decision to own an ACM studio. They just happen to be females whose business conforms to gender stereotypes that sexually objectify women. Such conformity is also true for the site's foreign ISP, its male clients, and the models themselves. Ergo, women's sexuality essentially becomes the centerpiece of an economic transaction between two cultures. Indeed, as Mathews notes, there are converging factors behind the ACM industry, such as western technology, poverty, and lack of jobs in the country, and domination of market-driven values. Philippine society then bears no monopoly over its perceived faults.

Notwithstanding the preceding comments, I realize that, on the individual level, ACM-ing latches onto a poor woman's dream for a better life. In a broader sense perhaps, the ACM industry relies not only on a pre-industrial piece-rate system, but also on the country's colonial past that nurtured socio-cultural and economic prejudices in terms of: (1) subservience to patriarchal institutions and beliefs (particularly Spain's land-grabbing Roman Catholic Church and racist government, the Almighty male God, the chaste Mother Mary, and the adulterous Mary Magdalene) that have greatly influenced Filipinos' traditional concepts of morality and sexuality, and (2) use of English to communicate with Americans who introduced public education to Filipinos. The same foreign language is also behind sexual freedom, globalization, and Internet technology, among others. Put together, these influences portray the Filipina as a paradox of conservatism and sexual liberalism, an image that Mathews likewise observes.

Mathews admits lacking guidance and also experience in dealing with sex chat sites while doing the research (p. 11). Consequently, he knows that ethical concerns may be raised about his methodology, but offers no excuse for committing lapses as a researcher (p. 12). Some of the lapses that I have observed are linked with how he responded to several women. Though it is admirable that he empathizes with them and vouches for moral neutrality towards their work, it seems that — for the purpose of research — he dropped some 'string along' lines to convince reluctant *Lanie/April* to talk to him: "I pointed out to her that such friendships could possibly lead somewhere" (p. 76). This statement gives the poor woman false hopes about having an intimate offline relationship with him. Likewise, his respect for a woman's choice to work as an ACM does not extend to his giving *Wildslaver* unsolicited self-improvement tips or to launch an 'experiment' by providing *Avril* a second-hand computer

and other items (sans webcam), so that she could operate her own studio and eventually hire others. He defends his actions by pointing at the economic benefit for the models, i.e., “at least have a job...a potential source of income” (p. 147), which somehow suggests that he condones exploitation of Filipinas based on how he defines the “exploitative and immoral” aspect of ACM work: “...the miserable incomes most girls get, if they get any at all” (p. 90). Mathews disputes that ACMs are victims of trafficking because many “...*willingly sought out* such employment, were aware of the remuneration system, and were free to leave...” (p. 92, emphasis in original).

Mathews could have referred sexually abused ACMs like *Vina* to seek help from women’s groups that could rescue them from their plight. Indeed, these seemingly gray areas can be used to stimulate debate on ethical guidelines and new data-gathering skills for researchers interested in probing online sex sites in the future.

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