



## Representing Rosalina and Annabel: Filipino Women, Violence, Media Representation, and Contested Realities

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the relationship between the lives of Filipino women and the images of their abuse that are constructed through several Australian newspapers. It presents case studies of two Filipino women—one a victim of homicide and the other missing in Australia—which are based on a feminist discourse analysis of articles and interviews conducted with their family members and friends. Analyzing newspaper representations vis-à-vis the interviews provides an entirely different, more accurate and just reconstruction of their lives. By charting the lives of these women—their loves and aspirations, and the pain and fear they suffered at the hands of abusive male partners—the article illuminates how newspaper accounts have misrepresented their experiences. Journalists did not account for the domestic violence that was a large part of the women’s lives, and dimensions of their abuse were silenced in the sexist, racist, and class-based discourse of the “mail-order bride.” Such discourse constitutes a sexual and racial “othering” of the women. The media representations reflect a limited understanding of women’s agency and independence within the constraints imposed by their intimate relations. The case studies highlight that the relationship between the media image and actual violence involves conflict over constructions of identity. It is a site of contested realities.

**KEYWORDS.** Filipino women · domestic violence · “mail-order bride” · media representation · contested realities

### INTRODUCTION

Violence has a materiality and is also constructed and made meaningful in discourse. Relations of violence, including the (male) control exercised over Filipino women’s bodies, are tangible and dangerously real, as evidenced by the emotional and physical pain suffered by abused women. However, lived experience is always interpreted through discourses, the structures in which ideology operates, which constitute the object of knowledge (Hennessy 1993, 75). Discourses shape our

sense of reality, what counts as the “truth”—of the world, people, practices, and events (Hennessy 1993; Foucault 1972, 1978a, 1978b). The abuse of Filipino women, for example, is always made sense of from a multitude of various positions. Abusive men often construct their actions as their right to “keep their women in order,” while abused women may feel that they deserve or have caused the violence they experience because they “failed to live up to” their partner’s expectations. A major institutional site of discourse is the media, a powerful ideological arena and institution of social control (Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney 1998, 182; Davies, Dickey, and Stratford 1987, 2-6). The media shape social life, enabling and constraining beliefs, perceptions, identities, and social relations, including differences of gender, race, and class (Scott 2001; Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney 1998, 206, 292; Jakubowicz et al. 1994, 3; Davies, Dickey, and Stratford 1987, 2-6) through representations. The media are major source of information about Filipino women in Australia, and also about domestic violence, including homicide.

The Australian media’s portrayal of Filipino women has, overall, been negative. The women are typically depicted as “mail-order brides,” with its subtext of exotic, submissive, and poverty-stricken women and/or opportunistic gold-diggers who will do anything to escape the poverty of the Philippines (Saroca 1997, 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). In this sexist, racist, and class-based discourse, Filipino women use Australian men as passports to Australia. This view has gained currency in popular Australian imaginings of the “Asian Other.” According to the New South Wales (NSW) Filipino Women’s Working Party, the sensationalist Australian media’s portrayals of Filipino women as “mail-order brides,” sex objects, and prostitutes have created a negative perception of all Filipino women, and their migration and settlement in Australia (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW 1992, 12).<sup>1</sup> As Cunneen and Stubbs (1997, 113-14) argue, such racialized and sexualized images of Filipino women as submissive yet sexual beings render the women vulnerable to male abuse in Australia. They establish that, aside from indigenous women, Filipino women in Australia are almost six times more likely to be victims of homicide than other Australian women (Cunneen and Stubbs 1997, 31). Particularly in the realm of human rights violations such as homicide, it is important to explore how the media represent Filipino women in order to understand the way image mediates reality.

This article examines the relationship between the lives of Filipino women and images of their abuse that are constructed through Australian newspapers. It is based on my doctoral dissertation (Saroca 2002). The article consists of case studies of Rosalina Canonizado, a victim of homicide; and Annabel Strzelecki, who has disappeared in Australia. The case studies consist of a feminist discourse analysis of newspaper articles and interviews with the women's family members and friends. Newspaper discourses, such as "mail-order bride," position Rosalina and Annabel at the intersections of gender, race, and class. They constitute a racial and sexual "othering" of the women. The interviews of Rosalina's and Annabel's families and friends are important media that also have the power to represent. In doing so, they counter the newspaper accounts. Analyzing the newspaper images vis-à-vis the interviews provides an entirely different, more accurate and just reconstruction of the women's lives. Rosalina Canonizado's and Annabel Strzelecki's case studies follow a discussion of methodological and theoretical issues. I then summarize the three main themes that emerged from my analysis of the interplay between the women's lives and newspaper images.

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

For this paper, I collected articles published between 1991 and 2000 from a range of Australian newspapers. Rosalina Canonizado's death; the court appearances of Rosalina's husband, Thomas Keir; Annabel Strzelecki's disappearance; and the suicide of Annabel's husband, Jim Strzelecki, took place between these dates. Data collection involved commercial archival searches, online newspaper sites, microfilm searches, and articles sent to me by people interested in the cases. Both stories received coverage in widely circulating Australian newspapers, including major dailies—like the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Age*, and *Advertiser*—and local community newspapers, such as the *Northern Argus*. The articles in this paper are representative of the way these Australian newspapers portrayed the women, and constructed Filipino women more generally (Saroca 2002). I used two methods for recruiting participants. First, I approached organizations in Australia and the Philippines, and these contacts then made the initial approach on my behalf to family members and friends of Rosalina and Annabel. Second, I advertised through various media such as Filipino newsletters in Australia.

Dead or missing women cannot speak on their behalf (see Morgan 1997, 238). Thus Rosalina's and Annabel's firsthand accounts of their marital relationships and the events that transpired are not available. As the living voice of the relationship, it is usually the perspective of the accused that is presented in the media coverage. Further, journalists tend to report the police and court version of events, which means that the victim's experience is often portrayed in a selective and biased way (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994, 105-8).

The absence of the woman's perspective can clearly be seen in the previous domestic violence that is not reported and in how women are constructed in the media. For Filipino women, in particular, the significance of their absent and silenced voices in the media accounts arises in the way they are represented in a context of fear and desire—as insatiable, grasping, manipulative women and as perfect partners for sex and marriage (see Cunneen and Stubbs 1997). I use the notion of absent voice to refer to that which is not present, what the text cannot say, while the silenced voice refers to a failure to mention or what the text refuses to say. As Macherey (1978) argues,

What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as ... "what it refuses to say," although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or not. [W]hat the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey into silence. (Macherey 1978, 87)

While it is obvious that Rosalina and Annabel can have no voice in the present, we can access their stories through those who knew them well. We can know the women as mediated through the stories of others. Relatives and friends were chosen based on their accessibility and willingness to discuss the women's lives and the media portrayals. They were in a position to talk about Rosalina and Annabel as they had witnessed how the women experienced violence at the hands of their male partners. Rosalina and Annabel also discussed their marital relations with these relatives and friends. I did not rely on one source or uncritically accept the accounts of family and friends, but cross-checked the latter representations for consistency and internal coherence in order to establish their reliability and accuracy. In exploring the print-media constructions and those of family and friends, New's (1998) point about competing knowledge claims and their evaluation is pertinent:

Knowledge is situated and perspectival, but that does not mean all perspectives are equally good, or that there are no good ways of judging between them. While there are no self-evident criteria for making such judgments, the internal coherence of the account, its scope and power to “situate possibilities” ... its implications for other accounts, and its practical effects are all relevant. (New 1998, 2)

The feminist discourse analysis I employ here is designed to provide a critique that illuminates problems of media representation and addresses the challenge of how absent women’s stories can be heard.

### **GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS AND “MAIL-ORDER BRIDES”**

Meaning is socially constructed, involves negotiation, is often contested, and shifts with historical and cultural contexts (Hall 1997a, 5, 9-10). Representation refers to the way meaning is produced and circulated through forms of language, such as words, images, and discourse (Hall 1997a, 1, 5; Lidchi 1997, 153). For Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup> (1972, 129; 1978b, 14-15), discourses are formations of power and knowledge that constrain and enable what can be meaningfully spoken, thought, and written about people, objects, and practices in specific historical periods. Discourses are productive: they constitute social reality by systematically forming “the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972, 49). Subjects constitute themselves and others, and are also constituted as particular kinds of people in discourse (Foucault 1978a)—as “mail-order brides,” for example. People construct meaning and communicate about the world to others using systems of representation (Hall 1997b, 25; Lidchi 1997, 153). Hall (1997b, 25) and Lidchi (1997, 162-63) argue that a distinction should be maintained between reality—people and things—and the symbolic practices of representation through which meaning is produced. The media representations are major sites of struggle over definitions of the “real” (Gledhill 1997, 348). They define the “normal” and mark boundaries (Bonwick 1996, 63).

Rosalina and Annabel are positioned at the intersections of gender, race, and class in terms of social relations, including relations of violence and newspaper images. Gender, race, and class are socially constructed. They are ideological formations and material relations. Gender refers to culturally ascribed notions of masculinity and femininity, and is a relationship inscribed in unequal divisions of labor. Although race is associated with physical characteristics like skin

color and facial features, there is no scientific validity to the notion of biologically discrete groups (American Anthropological Association 1999, 712-13; Pettman 1992, 2-12). Racism occurs when physical and cultural characteristics are seen to determine behavior and to justify discrimination and oppression (Jakubowicz et al. 1994, 29). Class extends beyond notions of common economic positions and life chances to encompass iniquitous international relations, including economic disparities between men in Australia and Filipino women from the so-called Third World. The membership and meanings of gender, race, and class constantly shift over time and involve contest (Frankenberg 1993, 11; Pettman 1992, 2-3, 60). They are relations of domination, subordination, and resistance—ways of constructing boundaries that define who belongs and who is excluded (Pettman 1992, 3).

Feminists highlight the sexist, racist, and class-biased ways women are represented in the mainstream media and how these discursive depictions fail to accurately portray women's lives (Saroca 1997, 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Howe 1997; Crenshaw 1991; Davies, Dickey, and Stratford 1987; hooks 1984, 1989). They identify a racialized and sexualized "othering" of women of color in which class is central (Constable 2003; Hilsdon 2003; Consalvo 1998; Saroca 1997, 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Tiongson 1999; Isis International-Manila 1998, 1999; Marshall 1997; Cunneen and Stubbs 1996, 1997, 2000; Gilbert, Lo, and Bobis 1994-1995; Holt 1993, 1996; Wall 1994; de Dios 1992, 1993, 2002; Mowatt and Wall 1992; David 1991; Davies, Dickey, and Stratford 1987, 4). As Pettman (1992) argues, minority women are often absent within western (media) discourses, and when they are made visible "it is often as problems or victims, in ways that deny them agency and ... explain their experiences within culturalist frames" (vii). "Mail-order bride" discourse in the media commentary on Filipino women is a sexual and racial "othering" of the women (Saroca 1997, 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Cunneen and Stubbs 1996, 1997, 2000).

I have argued elsewhere (Saroca 1997, 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b) that "mail-order bride" is the dominant discourse on Filipino women in the Australian media, regardless of the facts of the women's lives. Despite the discourse, most Filipino-Australian couples do not meet via introduction agencies or Internet sites (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2004; Saroca 2002, 2006a; Navarro-Tolentino 1992, 25-26). Networks of migrant Filipino women living in Australia are the

major means by which Australian men meet other Filipino women (Iredale, Innes, and Castles 1992, 23-24; Kaminskas and Smith 1990, 13). These migrants introduce Australian men to female family members and friends in the Philippines (Saroca 2002, 58). Rosalina Canonizado, for instance, met Thomas Keir through a similar mediated arrangement.

In explaining how journalists produce discourses that support particular ideologies and misrepresent women's experiences, it is important to understand the structural and cultural contexts of media industries. It is these environments and the editor's pen that largely dictate the final copy (Saroca 2002, 198). Journalists help create and are shaped by the dominant discourses circulating within their societies. The Australian media is a product of colonization, racism, and sexism, of which anti-Asian racism is a major facet. Media cultures are often racist, patriarchal, and profit-oriented. This milieu provides fertile ground for the genre of reporting that has developed around Filipino women as "mail-order brides." Such misrepresentations serve the interests of media practitioners who seek to create controversy and emphasize difference to maximize sales and to reinforce existing social and moral orders (Scott 2001).

Economic imperatives to make profits and attract advertising revenue, and time constraints are major structural forces on journalistic practices that lead to particular news formats and stories (Turner and Cunningham 2002, 18; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1991, 36, 40-41). Journalists frequently use sensationalist stereotypes to sell newspapers and employ standard news formulas to save time. "Mail-order bride" is both a stereotype and a set formula for representing Filipino women in Australia. Time constraints, deadlines, employment structures, space, staffing, funding priorities, limited resources, and competition place heavy constraints on journalists and limit investigative reporting and the in-depth discussions of social issues (Sheridan Burns 2002, 9; Jakubowicz et al. 1994, 160).

Similarly, the cultural values and beliefs of media practitioners and organizations shape news in that they influence the selection and interpretation of stories (Sheridan Burns 2002, 8; Jakubowicz et al. 1994, 159). Events are (re)constructed and evaluated according to newsworthiness, perceived audiences, and the interests and goals of journalists and news organizations to receive economic rewards and to advance particular themes and political views (Sheridan Burns 2002, 32; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987). News values ensure that

dominant cultural values are constantly reproduced in the news while other perspectives are screened out as non-newsworthy or marginal (Jakubowicz et al. 1994, 159).

In putting men's violence into print, journalists often use representational strategies, such as not addressing previous violence, privileging the abuser's story, and finding fault with the victim's behavior, lifestyle, and characteristics—for example, describing her as a “mail-order bride”—to minimize or obscure men's responsibility for violence (Saroca 2002; Howe 1997, 201; Consalvo 1998; Cunneen and Stubbs 1996, 1997; Women's Coalition Against Family Violence 1994). The perpetrator's crime becomes secondary to concerns about the woman, and responsibility for abuse is shifted on the victim while the man becomes the victim (Saroca 2002; Cunneen and Stubbs 1996, 1997; Women's Against Family Violence 1994, 3, 36, 139; Consalvo 1998, 193).

### ROSALINA CANONIZADO

Rosalina Cecilia Canonizado was born in 1966 in the Philippines. I use Rosalina's family name of Canonizado out of respect for her mother, Ester, who does not want her daughter to be remembered in her married name, Keir. Rosalina came from a middle-class family. She graduated from a university with a Bachelor of Commerce degree. As a graduation gift, Rosalina's sister, Ella, gave her an airline ticket to visit relatives in Australia. Rosalina met Thomas Keir at a family wedding in Sydney in 1988. A few weeks before their meeting, Keir's wife, twenty-two-year-old Jean Angela Strachan Keir, also a Filipina, disappeared, leaving behind a three-year-old son. Keir alleged Jean had run off with her lover. Jean was Rosalina's second cousin but, at the time, Rosalina was unaware of their family relationship. Keir pursued Rosalina, divorced Jean on the basis of his claim that she had left him, and Rosalina married Keir in the Philippines in November 1989. On April 13, 1991, Rosalina Canonizado was killed in their house in western Sydney, strangled with a lamp cord and then set on fire. She was twenty-four years old. Thomas Keir was charged with her murder. The prosecution alleged that his motive was Rosalina's AUD 80,000 life insurance policy. On April 6, 1993, a jury found Keir not guilty of Rosalina Canonizado's murder.

In 1991, while Thomas Keir was in prison awaiting trial for Rosalina's murder, the police, acting on information received, dug



under the house and found fragments of human bone, which were sent to the United States for deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) testing. On September 17, 1999, Thomas Keir was found guilty of Jean Keir's murder (see Wall 2000; Hunt and Stubbs 1999). He was sentenced to twenty-four years' imprisonment, comprising a minimum term of eighteen years and an additional term of six years (*Regina v Thomas Andrew Keir* 2000). The NSW Criminal Court of Appeal quashed Keir's conviction on the grounds that Justice Adams misdirected the jury regarding the DNA evidence (see KASAMA 2002). A new trial again found Keir guilty of Jean's murder. However, this second conviction was later quashed and a retrial ordered due to concerns about how the trial was conducted. In his second retrial, Keir was found guilty, and on December 13, 2004, he was sentenced to twenty-two years' imprisonment.

### **Newspaper Representations of Rosalina**

Although there is continuity in images of Rosalina Canonizado across the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Sunday Telegraph*, there is also a marked discontinuity in her portrayal over time within the same newspaper chain (*Sunday Telegraph* and *Daily Telegraph*). Rosalina epitomizes a contradiction. She is presented as a beautiful young bride, a "perfect marriage partner," and as a gold-digging opportunist—an object of both desire and fear. The newspaper portrayal of Rosalina in terms of desire and fear of the "exotic other" is related to the heterogeneity of "mail-order bride" discourse. Game (1991) captures this play between desire and fear when she argues our "relation to nature as other is one of ambivalence: desire structured around fear. The landscape is beautiful but threatening" (169). As Hamilton (1990, 18) contends, although there is fear of an "Asian" entity outside the boundaries, there is also desire for her exotic otherness. Similarly, Kabbani (1994, 26) asserts that colonizers exhibited ambivalence toward "Oriental" women, fluctuating between desire, pity, contempt, and outrage, thus their construction as scheming witches and/or erotic victims.

Two particular articles about Thomas Keir's acquittal for Rosalina's murder, among several others, portray their relationship as a love match and domestic bliss. They construct Rosalina as a good (and desirable) wife with traditional family values who preferred to stay at home and care for her husband. Macken, in her *Sydney Morning Herald* article, states:

Thomas Andrew Keir loved his wife, Rosalie. As neighbours who knew them said, they seemed very happy during the 18 months they were married ... In his statement to the jury, Mr Keir said: "I loved Rosalie very much" ... "He was her first boyfriend," Mrs. Canonizado had said outside the court ... "And for someone who is away from her family for the first time ... she would fall in love with anyone who was really nice to her." And Mr. Keir was really nice to Rosalie. As [Keir's counsel] told the jury: "If there was any whisper of a bad relationship between Mr. Keir and his wife, you would have heard it." Of almost 50 people who gave evidence in the trial, no one knew of any problem in their relationship. (1993, 6)

According to Rosalina Canonizado's mother and sister, family members were not asked to testify in court. A few days later, the *Sunday Telegraph* ran Quinn's article in which she restates the notion of the love match:

Mr. Keir's mother ... describes the relationship between her son and Rosalie as "wonderful"—a view shared by neighbours, who gave evidence at the trial that the couple seemed very happy during the 18 months they were married ... The pair seemed very much in love and spent little time apart. (1993, 8)

Although Rosalina was married for nearly seventeen months, Quinn describes her as Thomas Keir's "beloved bride." Macken and Quinn presented sympathetic accounts of Thomas Keir and gave him considerable space to tell his story. Various sources—such as Keir's neighbors, his mother, and his counsel—were used to bolster his claim that he loved Rosalina and they were happy. Macken even links the statements of Rosalina's mother with those of Keir and his counsel in a way that supports Keir's story of a love match.

Discourses of love and domestic bliss are missing from the *Daily Telegraph* report on Thomas Keir's conviction in 1999 for Jean Keir's murder. Instead, an undercurrent of fear is discernible. Peterson (1999a, 1999b) correctly portrays Keir as a violently jealous man who brutally dominated Jean's life. In the context of Keir's violence toward Jean, he briefly mentions Keir's similar treatment of Rosalina Canonizado. When Peterson refers to Rosalina, he articulates an explicitly sexist, racist, and class-biased discourse:

When Thomas Keir showed more than a passing interest in Rosalina Canonisado [sic] she thought he was her ticket to a better life. She came from a poor family in the Philippines while he owned a business, a house and showered her with gifts. Rosalina ignored warnings from her Sydney-based relatives that Keir totally dominated the life of his first wife. (1999b, 18)

Peterson identifies Rosalina Canonizado's behavior and "culture" as the problem. As Pettman (1992, 35) argues, women are often represented in ways that suggest they experience dangers because they are "Asian" ("mail-order brides"). Cultural difference or race becomes the explanation rather than other factors that locate women socially, such as racism, sexism, and male violence. Rosalina is out of place in both racial and spatial sense—she did not stay in "her place" in the Philippines, and violence is seen as the outcome of her desire for a better life.

### **Rosalina's Story**

Ester and Ella, Rosalina's mother and sister, respectively, contest the theme of love match, which pervades the reports of Thomas Keir's acquittal for Rosalina's murder. According to her family, Rosalina did not experience Keir's "love" as "domestic bliss." His jealousy and need to control her point to domestic violence. Ester and Ella offer a different interpretation to the journalistic fiction of the couple as being so in love that they spent little time apart. What the newspaper accounts failed to mention was that Keir's jealousy and domination was a major factor in keeping them together:

Ester: Because she was not allowed to ... visit our relatives very often, she got lonely. She can't go anywhere she wants unless she's with Tom ... That's why our other relatives were saying, "Oh Rosalie, we have not been seeing you so much ..."

Ella: It's like she was in hiding. [Prior] to her marriage, [she] had a very good relationship with our relatives there ... [S]ince she got married ... she's not allowed to go alone ...

Ester: [S]he's not free to visit them anytime she wants. (January 2000)

Thomas Keir was even jealous of Rosalina's relationship with her father, and his possessiveness extended to dictating what she could wear:

Ella: Tom ... was very possessive ... [W]hen my papa ... visited them ... and my sister was wearing ... shorts ... Tom covered her legs ... [I]n one of my relative's place that they went swimming, he doesn't want my sister to wear bathing suits. He just wants her to be in ... long shorts.

Ester: He always says, "Don't wear shorts." (January 2000)

Justice Adams's comments at Thomas Keir's sentencing for Jean Keir's murder are pertinent here. Justice Adams notes that Keir was jealous of Jean's relationships even with male members of her family (*Regina v Thomas Andrew Keir* 2000, 1). He adds,

the prisoner's arrogant, controlling behaviour in respect of his wife, demonstrated from time to time by his manhandling of her, his concealment of her contraceptive pills and his threats of murder, showed that he considered her as his property to be dealt with as he thought it right ... I have no doubt that he believed he had the right to violently punish his wife for not only defying but also for trying to leave him ... (*Regina v Thomas Andrew Keir* 2000, 8-9)

In addition, Ester and Ella stated that Thomas Keir's drinking, gambling, and smoking were significant sources of conflict in the marriage. Rosalina's arguments with Keir over his behavior further challenge the media discourse of domestic bliss, as Ester's comments highlight:

[M]y husband ... often sees [Tom] gargle first before he will pick up Rosalie to hide that he is already drunk. Because my daughter was really against his drinking ... [she] is always telling me, "How can I save so much when my husband is always buying liquor, cigarettes and ... I can't stop his gambling, this dog racing." (January 2000)

Three days before she was killed, Rosalina called her family in Manila in a state of heightened distress about her domestic situation. Ella said,

[Rosalina] called up several times prior to her death. First she was babbling about buying a car. [The] next call she was telling me, "You know this guy lost [AUD 10,000] in the dog race ... I've been working hard. I want to go back. My car will be delivered soon and we don't have money ..." [T]here was a video showing that they were okay ... very sweet and that's the video that they've been showing [in court] ... Will you let people know that you're fighting? [You] just keep it to yourself when you fight. (January 2000)

Rosalina's family were concerned that neither the court nor the media chose to investigate this angle in relation to her death. Rather, as Ella astutely noted, in the official reconstruction of events all traces of conflict were removed.

Peterson, the *Daily Telegraph* journalist, telephoned Ester Canonizado in the Philippines after Keir's original conviction for Jean's murder and spoke with her at length. Yet, despite evidence to the contrary, he represented Rosalina as coming from a "poor family" and

using the affluent Thomas Keir as a “ticket to Australia.” What Peterson refused to say was that Rosalina was a highly educated woman from a middle-class family of professionals who travel extensively. My own interactions with the Canonizado family during my visits to the Philippines and their visits to my home in Australia confirm this latter representation of Rosalina. Ester and Ella were highly critical of the newspaper portrayal:

[About] the articles that came out after my sister’s death that [said] we were very poor in the Philippines, well I just can say that we’re not very poor ... we all went to [university]. My mother was a public school teacher ... I can speak English very well so we must have gone to a good school ... My father ... used to work with Manila Gas Corporation as a senior collector ... [T]here was no deeper investigation ... on the part of the media ... [I]t just came out that she was a poor girl, helpless, and she just wanted to come to Australia to marry an Australian and live there. (Ella, January 2000)

Peterson’s (1999b) discursive construction of Thomas Keir’s “First World” affluence and Rosalina Canonizado’s “Third World” poverty unravels when set against Ester and Ella’s comments. They point out that Rosalina was not a financial dependent. She was Thomas Keir’s business partner. Rosalina provided further financial support to Keir through her work in an accounting firm. Keir was not rich. Rather, Rosalina worked hard at two jobs to make their upholstery business successful:

[Rosalina] said she has put a lot of money ... in the business so that it will be successful ... Tom ... really doesn’t want her ... to work, but ... they need the money because the business is just starting ... [The media] emphasized that Tom is a rich guy and he owns a big upholstery business when ... Rosalie helped, even funded him ... she even was working two jobs. She was working ... and after that she helped Tom ... in finishing the upholstery ... My husband said when he was still vacationing there, “Sometimes I pity my daughter because early in the morning she goes out, she does not even take breakfast. She just drinks milk and vitamins and goes at once to her work. Then in the evening, she even helps in the shop.” (Ester, January 2000)

When Rosalina received a letter from Jean’s family about Thomas Keir just before their wedding, their relationship was already established. It was only after they married, as is often the case with abusive men, that his violence came to the fore. The perceived reason for the letter and

the fact that Jean's family had initiated the meeting between Rosalina and Keir also worked to dampen concern. Ella explains,

When there was already a schedule for the wedding, [Jean's mother] sent a letter to Rosalie because she was mad at Tom. But ... she and another auntie introduced him to her ... Jean's mother and Tom's mother had a fight over Jean's son ... Then she started warning Rosalie, "Oh you see, that guy is like that ... And he was very much in love with my daughter." After all that had happened, she introduced them ... that letter is so hard to accept 'cause ... there was no mentioning of Jean before. (January 2000)

Rosalina Canonizado did not recklessly ignore warnings from relatives. At the time of her marriage, it is understandable she did not realize the danger Keir posed to her safety.

Ester and Ella make it clear that Australian journalists could not accurately portray Rosalina as they did not interview family members about her. Instead, they privileged Thomas Keir's account and misrepresented Rosalina as a "mail-order bride":

Ella: Accuracy, definitely none, 'cause we were never asked to say something about her. And only the side of Tom was given ... [T]hey did not focus on how she was as a person. That she was ... a graduate in a premier university was never mentioned ... [T]he side that was reported was from the other party to ... generalize Filipinas who come to Australia as "mail-order brides." They did not access information from us ... [T]hey didn't find out if what they wrote was true ... If the other side says "these are not poor families," at least they [should] check it out.

Ester: They did not tell the truth about Rosalina's purpose in coming to Australia. And they just assume that she got there because she wanted to marry an Australian and make him as a stepping stone to get to Australia. (January 2000)

## ANNABEL STRZELECKI

Annabel Sabellano Strzelecki was born in 1969 in the Philippines. She was the youngest child in a large and impoverished family. Annabel met Wlodzimierz "Jim" Strzelecki through a newspaper advertisement. Her friends said Jim was also writing to several other Filipino women. They married in the Philippines in 1989. Annabel was nineteen, and Jim Strzelecki was sixty-three. They had two children. On June 6, 1998, Annabel Strzelecki disappeared from her home in Clare, South

Australia. She was twenty-eight years old. Jim told the police four different stories about Annabel's disappearance. During the weekend of June 17-18, 2000, Jim Strzelecki committed suicide. Police investigations into Annabel Strzelecki's case continue (see KASAMA 2000; Hunt 1999).

### Newspaper Representations of Annabel

Toward the end of June 1998, articles about Annabel Strzelecki's disappearance began appearing in Australian newspapers. The media coverage was generally sympathetic, and interviews with Annabel's friends remained a central feature. Three major themes were articulated: the representation of Annabel Strzelecki as a "Filipino bride," her portrayal as a devoted mother, and shifting images of Jim Strzelecki and their marital relationship, depending on whether his perspective or that of Annabel's friends was presented.

Haran's (1998) *Sunday Mail* article portrays Annabel Strzelecki as a "Filipino bride" and a good mother. In addition, he hints at Jim Strzelecki's exercise of control in their relationship:

Ms. Strzelecki, a *Filipino bride*, 28, vanished from her Clare home ... [O]ne of her close friends, Lillian Lane, said: "She was a wonderful mother and a devoted wife. She would not walk out and leave her children ..." *The pair married nine years ago in the Philippines ...* Problems between the couple started toward the end of last year when "Annabel began to express herself ..." [Mrs. Lane said,] "She was the sort of woman who was totally devoted to her children—and I don't believe she would consider taking them away." (Haran 1998, 17) [emphasis added]

Debelle (1998) illuminates these themes in her poignant account, "Tears for Annabel," in *The Age*. Debelle relied on the accounts of Annabel Strzelecki's friends. She describes Annabel's disappearance as "the latest chapter in a sad story of broken dreams" (Debelle 1998, 7). The caption FILIPINO BRIDES appears directly above the headline. In media discourse, Filipino bride is an abbreviated version of "mail-order bride," both of which are used synonymously with Filipino woman (see Saroca 2002). The repetition of the term "Filipino bride" in the text bolsters the notion that Annabel was a "mail-order bride." She is also portrayed as a devoted mother who loved her husband

despite his harsh treatment. Jim Strzelecki emerges as an uncaring man who dominated his wife:

Annabel Strzelecki, a *Filipino bride* ... disappeared three months ago ... *Annabel Sabellano came to Australia in 1989 to marry Jim Strzelecki* ... Annabel ... struggled against the odds to build a home ... “She was very gentle and a good mum ... She tried to be happy for the children,” [friends said] ... Strzelecki was hard on Annabel. He resented her having outside friends and would ... [order] her home to cook his lunch. He seemed to regard her as being there to do his bidding and she was entirely reliant on him for money ... Strzelecki said publicly after Annabel disappeared that ... the marriage was not happy and he did not want her back. (Debelle 1998, 7) [emphasis added]

Debelle (1998) is describing relations of abuse. However, like Haran (1998), she stops short of actually naming Strzelecki’s behavior as domestic violence.

In her *Northern Argus* article, Hannagan (1998) does not even refer to Strzelecki’s violence. While Annabel is again depicted as a good mother and wife, Jim Strzelecki is represented as a kind and considerate husband:

[Olive] said although Annabel was only 28 and a naive girl from a rural area of the Philippines, she loved her husband ... and adored her children ... “She was a good and devoted wife and mother and loved her husband even though there was a great age difference ... *She used to say he was kind and generous, and was very pleased that he agreed that she could take the children back home on a holiday this year.*” (Hannagan 1998, 1) [emphasis added]

Jim’s violence is again hidden in Pudney’s (2000) report in the *Advertiser* about Strzelecki’s suicide. Two years after disappearing, Annabel Strzelecki remains a bride:

An elderly man suspected of murdering his young *Filipino bride* has been found dead in his home at Clare ... Annabel Strzelecki ... was 19 when *she moved from the Philippines in 1989 to marry Mr. Strzelecki*, then 63. (Pudney 2000, 11) [emphasis added]

Although Haran (1998), Debelle (1998), and Pudney (2000) portray Annabel Strzelecki as a “Filipino bride,” they also undermine the notion. All three refer to the length of her marriage. Annabel was not a newly married woman or a woman about to marry, whom we commonly refer to as brides. She had been married for nine years and



can hardly be called a bride. The reporting here raises several questions. First, when does a Filipina cease to be a bride? Other women in similar situations are not described in the same way, and after marriage men are not referred to as grooms. Second, why do journalists persist in labeling Filipino women as brides when they do not fit the description? Third, how does a single event come to define a woman's entire existence? Annabel's life had a richness and significance beyond meeting her husband through an advertisement, a form of what is popularly called the "mail-order bride" trade. The term stigmatizes Filipino women, and the women themselves find the word offensive. Moreover, there is no corresponding term for the men who meet Filipino women through introduction agencies and advertisements. Journalists did not label Jim Strzelecki a "mail-order groom."

### **Annabel's Story**

Olive and Charles shared Annabel's story with me. They were the first people to meet Annabel when she arrived in Clare, and they helped her adjust to life in a new country. The three became good friends. Given their close relationship, journalists sought to interview Olive and Charles about Annabel's disappearance.

One of the most glaring aspects of Annabel's relationship with Jim Strzelecki was the forty-four-year age difference. The age disparity was a key feature of the media reportage. A situation in which a sixty-three-year-old man can go to the Philippines and marry a nineteen-year-old woman indicates profound power inequalities of sexism, racism, and class. To understand why Annabel married Jim, it is necessary to grasp the hardship of her life in an impoverished peasant family in rural Philippines and how a "kind" foreign man promised her a better life. Annabel desired the happiness she thought would come from establishing her own family away from the insecurities of her daily life. Olive explains,

Because she's the youngest in the family they used to ask her to help them look after the children so they can go to work ... [W]hen I ask her, "Why did you have to marry him? He's too old for you. You are too young for him ..." [S]he said, "Well this is my life ..." She has a big family, that the sisters and brothers have their children, and she just used to look after them and they were not giving her anything ... [W]hen this man came along ... he bought her clothes and bag ... She's young, but then this man showed to her everything that he could in the Philippines, his fineness, his generosity ... I remember Annabel telling me, "Oh he's like a millionaire

there. He's giving money to everyone ..." But I can tell that Annabel has married him not for his money ... All I can see on her is to raise her children and be happy with her husband. (August 1999)

Newspaper images of Annabel as simply a young "mail-order bride" who married an elderly Australian man fail to capture Annabel's dreams and longings for love in a caring marriage. They do not provide a nuanced account of Annabel's life.

While Annabel Strzelecki saw her "better life" as finding happiness in a loving family with her husband and children, Jim Strzelecki's idea of a better life was a wife who would obey him absolutely and attend to his every need. Charles makes this clear:

[R]estricted life Annabel got out here. It was very restricted doing everything ... She had to conform to his beliefs and his ways ... It was quite obvious she never had any say in anything. (August 1999)

For example, Jim Strzelecki believed that televisions and telephones emitted poisonous rays, and he refused to have these appliances in the house. He thus denied Annabel and their children access to modes of communication that most Australians take for granted.

Olive and Charles described the extreme abuse Annabel experienced in her marriage. Although they reveal a long history of domestic violence, they did not name it as such. This failure to name domestic violence was also a feature of the media reporting. In some cases, Strzelecki's violence was invisible. Hannagan (1998) further misrepresented Annabel's relationship with Jim Strzelecki by misquoting Olive. Olive told me she did not say that Annabel had said her husband was kind and generous and had agreed she could take the children to the Philippines for a holiday. Violence was a large part of Annabel Strzelecki's life with Jim Strzelecki. While it is central to her story, violence does not feature strongly in newspaper accounts of Annabel's disappearance. It is absent, silenced. By not identifying or downplaying this violence, even sympathetic journalists misrepresented the reality of Annabel's life.

According to Charles and Olive, Jim Strzelecki was cruel and domineering. He tried to control Annabel's every move. Annabel's suffering was enormous:

Charles: He would expect her ... to walk into Clare and walk back out again ... and they'd walk from the caravan park to Clare, which is ... three, four kilometers.

Olive: With a baby.

Further, Jim Strzelecki dominated Annabel's interactions with their children. He did not allow her to make important decisions regarding them. His cruel treatment of their children and his refusal to permit Annabel a say in their upbringing were an increasing source of conflict in their marriage. Strzelecki saw any challenge to the harsh rules he imposed on his family as a threat to his authority, as Olive recounts:

She tried to avoid argument all the time ... she preferred to be quiet. But then as the children were growing older and needing more, like playing outside with other children ... attending parties also of other children so they could enjoy their [childhood], and playing with toys ... he disliked it ... Annabel told me, "It's [my daughter's] birthday yesterday ..." So I bought some books ... and a teddy bear ... And I gave each two dollars also, and [Annabel's children] were so happy. And Annabel was happy. After that I could see Annabel was always very unhappy. And they had an argument. [He] came to see me, "I don't want you to give any gifts to my children ... I don't want you to give them books or toys ... I will be the one to choose the books that my children will read ..." He said to me, "Don't try to destroy my marriage." (August 1999)

Even before their mother's disappearance, Annabel's children were subjected to what Irwin and Wilkinson (1997, 17) term a "reign of terror" living in a domestic-violence environment.<sup>3</sup> Strzelecki used the children to control Annabel's behavior and movements. An incident that occurred not long before her disappearance illustrates this:

Charles: Annabel wanted to go back to visit the Philippines. And he would let her go initially but she had to leave the two children behind. This is ... an insurance ...

Olive: [Annabel's mother] ... advised her ... not to leave ... the kids because of his ... relationship with his children [from the previous marriage]. So Annabel was very ... determined to take the two kids ... she even went to this Australian friend to help her file an application for a passport for the little girl. (August 1999)

Annabel Strzelecki's stand against her husband was unsuccessful. She disappeared before she could take her children back to see their relations in the Philippines.

As part of his violent regime, Jim Strzelecki subjected his wife to social and emotional abuse. He made Annabel constantly accountable

for her movements and tried to isolate her from friends. Strzelecki played psychological mind games in his attempts to confine Annabel in their house. He went to extreme lengths to make Annabel feel guilty for wanting contact with other people:

Charles: Another time she came here ... and Jim walked in the back door ... He said, "I wanna be with you. I might die any minute and I want you to be there when I die." No reason in the wide, wide world why he should die, but these are the things he used to say.

Olive: Yeah, because she asked permission to go out. And he said okay. But after that, when she got home, they fought. He would disagree again of that ...

Charles: [H]e ... collapsed one night on the floor ... after a while he just jumped up. He'd only feigned it. What he wanted to do was to find out Annabel's reaction; if it was for real life, just what would she do? This is the type of thing he would do. (August 1999)

Despite her husband's abuse, Annabel established a wide network of friends. This contact gave her the courage to challenge his authority in an attempt to improve her life and the lives of her children. As Annabel struggled to do something about her oppression, Strzelecki's violence intensified as he tried to maintain his control over her:

Charles: He couldn't make friends and he more or less wouldn't let her have friends ... this is probably her downfall when she started seeing a little bit more to life than what she'd been putting up with ...

Olive: Well she was looking for a better life, to have a real family life in bringing up her children ... I even told Jim before, "If you choose the books that your children read and you want everything to be done within your own principle, what is the role of your wife then?" So those are the reasons why Annabel was having problems already with him. He never gave her freedom to choose. Never gave her freedom to decide for her children.

## ACKNOWLEDGING VIOLENCE

Rosalina and Annabel were subjected to many different types of abuse. Thomas Keir and Jim Strzelecki shared a common belief that they did not have to be accountable for their treatment of their partners. They believed and acted in ways that suggested these women were their

“property,” that the women did not have any rights. These relationships were characterized by abuses of male power and control. They were regimes of terror. Central here was the psychological abuse, which was intended to destroy Rosalina’s and Annabel’s self-confidence and identities. It became clear in Rosalina’s and Annabel’s cases that men also exercised control over women through their children and by isolating them from networks of family and friends. Moreover, it was apparent the violence intensified as the men attempted to maintain control. Journalists, however, failed to acknowledge the domestic violence that preceded Rosalina’s death and Annabel’s disappearance. Even in her sympathetic account, Debelle (1998) talked around Strzelecki’s abuse of Annabel without actually naming his behavior as violence. By not reporting previous violence, journalists obscure the context of the homicide and the power relationship between killer and victim (Women’s Coalition Against Family Violence 1994, 2-3).

### **“Mail-Order Bride” Discourse and Violence**

Rosalina and Annabel came from different class, regional, and educational backgrounds. The ways they met their partners and their migration to Australia differed. In the media, however, the women were treated as a part of a homogeneous group—as “mail-order brides”—and their particularities were hidden. Moreover, dimensions of Rosalina’s and Annabel’s abuse were silenced in “mail-order bride” discourse.

“Mail-order bride” is an orientalist discourse through which those designated “Asian” or “Oriental” are given meaning (Said 1978). Lewis (1996, 4, 19) emphasizes the diversity of positions within orientalist discourse and the points of resistance in its imaginary unity. She argues that Orientalism is a heterogeneous discourse in which meanings are always contested and shifting (1996, 237). As Bhabha (1994, 69-70) suggests, an identity is enacted in a space disrupted by the heterogeneity of other positions so it cannot be secure. While “mail-order bride” is a heterogeneous discourse with diverse and ambivalent positionings and spaces for resistance, it is also a hegemonic ideology preconstructed in the interdiscourse. Pecheux’s (1975, 113-21) concept of the interdiscourse explains the textuality of hegemony and how cultural common sense is maintained. The preconstructed conveys the sense of an “always-already there” and “what everyone knows” (Pecheux 1975, 115, 121). It gives rise to the notion that all Filipino women are “mail-order brides.” The hegemony and heterogeneity of “mail-order bride”

discourse illuminate how desire and fear can both appear in images of Filipino women, such as Rosalina Canonizado.

When journalists use the expression “mail-order bride,” they are operationalizing assumptions about the “contractual” basis of a Filipino woman’s relationship with her non-Filipino partner. As Kathryn Robinson (1996, 54, 56) argues, “mail-order bride” defines Filipino women as commodities, and they are then seen to undermine the notion of romantic love as the basis of marriage. The term constitutes and reflects the “illegitimacy” of the women and their motives for marriage (Robinson 1996). Newspaper discourses of Rosalina and Annabel as “mail-order brides” contain an explicit subtext that they married to escape poverty in the Philippines. All interviews, however, suggest they loved their husbands and hoped to establish families in a caring relationship.

## AGENCY

Although Rosalina and Annabel were the victims of extreme abuse that severely restricted their ability to act, they struggled in various ways to do something about the oppression they experienced at the hands of their abusive male partners. The women challenged the authority of their partners and the men’s assumed rights to control their lives. Against her husband’s wishes, Rosalina entered the paid workforce, and she argued with Keir over his drinking and gambling. Despite her husband’s attempts to isolate her, Annabel established a network of friends and was determined to take her children to the Philippines for a holiday. Moreover, regardless of threats against discussing their abuse or seeking help, Rosalina and Annabel disclosed the abuse to family members or friends. Such a finding “directly challenges the notion that women experiencing domestic violence perpetuate the situation by remaining silent about the abuse” (Partnerships Against Domestic Violence 1998, xi). Yet, in most newspaper articles, their struggles were not highlighted. Journalists’ representations of Rosalina and Annabel reflect a limited understanding of their agency and independence within the constraints imposed by their intimate relations. According to Roces (1996, 1998), the view of Filipino women as victims obscures the blurring between victim and agency; while women are often victims, they have other roles and actively participate in the wider society. Being a victim needs to be balanced with an awareness of women’s initiatives to deal with abuse. Rosalina’s and Annabel’s

involvements with their families, communities, and friends reflect their agency, identity, and sometimes resistance to their partner's violence.

In discussing the three main themes that emerged from my analysis of the interplay between Rosalina's and Annabel's lives and newspaper images, it is important to acknowledge that female journalists are not necessarily more sympathetic or less racist than their male colleagues. The female gender of a journalist does not guarantee that the media texts she creates will take a feminist view (see Saroca 2002). There is no fixed essence to women that determines they will think and act in a particular way. Female journalists may be women-centered, but may hold patriarchal and racist views on women.

## CONCLUSION

This article raises important issues regarding media sources and the use of interviews. First, journalists cannot tell the victim's story unless they interview families and friends, those in caring relationships with her, and those who knew her well. Second, journalists must provide a fair account of what these sources say, rather than shaping interview quotes to fit stereotypes of Filipino women. Third, problems of representation arise when journalists privilege the story of the suspect without considering the element of self-interest in the presentation of the relationship with the victim in as good a light as possible. As Scott (2001) argues,

Fair representation ... requires journalists to discover the full breadth of facts, to check them against a range of sources, and to present them in an even-handed way that discloses whose interests are served by various statements ... [I]t requires journalists to actively combat their own ignorance or insensitivity ... [It also] requires interviewing all interested parties and carefully observing their words and actions while being aware of prejudices and preconceptions that get in the way of understanding the story from the interviewee's point of view. Balance ... is about equal representation of points of view that requires a high degree of empathy from the journalist. It is this empathy ... that prevents events, issues, and people from being sensationalised, trivialised, or stereotyped in ways that perpetuate mythologies and racist attitudes. (Scott 2001, 144)

Fourth, this article suggests the benefits of exploring how the gender, race, and class identities of journalists inform their reportage of

Filipino women and violence. Female journalists are not necessarily more sympathetic or less racist and sexist than their male colleagues.

When reporting violence, there is a need for journalists to develop a cultural competence “in the cultural contexts in which they are working” (Scott 2001, 142). This includes respecting cultural differences, rather than sensationalizing and sexualizing those differences, and identifying stereotypical representations that perpetuate myths of the “other” (Scott 2001, 141). Racism- and sexism-awareness training and cross-cultural communications courses for journalists, as well as for those who come in contact with Filipino women—immigration officers, police, judiciary, lawyers, advocates, social workers, educators, researchers, the general public, and so on—are vital. These practitioners clearly require more education regarding domestic violence and all its manifestations, including racist abuse, and how to treat Filipina victims with respect and dignity. Although journalists negotiate competing professional, commercial, and ethical considerations in constructing and presenting news, they each have some power to practice responsibly, to treat the subjects of their reportage with fairness and dignity, to decide what constitutes news, what questions to ask or to omit (Sheridan Burns 2002, 7, 10-11).

The discourse constitutes a sexual and racial “othering” of Rosalina and Annabel in which class is central. Sensationalist images of gender, race, and class provide little insight into the violence Rosalina and Annabel suffered at the hands of abusive male partners. This caused further pain, suffering, and anger for their families and friends. As Thiesmeyer (1996) argues, “it is precisely in the disappearances ... performed by media, in a silencing of particular discourses, that real bodies are sacrificed” (4). Further, newspaper images reflect a limited understanding of Rosalina’s and Annabel’s agency within the constraints of their marital relations. Journalists need to account for the initiatives of Filipino women in countering male violence. In addressing the ways Filipino women struggle around domestic violence in their homes and communities, and establish support networks, journalists could help empower other Filipino women in abusive relationships. This would also educate men about their behavior. Networking and ongoing dialogue between journalists and Filipino women could help ensure that reporting be accurate in reflecting women’s lives and be culturally competent and sensitive. ❀



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## NOTES

1. For a broader discussion of the context in which Filipino women migrate, marry, live, and experience abuse in Australia, see Saroca 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b.
2. Although Foucault provides a useful framework for analyzing women's oppression, he fails to address the gender, race, and class configurations of power on the body. He neglects that power is often patriarchal; it inscribes male and female bodies in quite specific ways with different consequences, and the subjugation of women's bodies is a primary target (Spivak 1988; Diamond and Quinby 1988, xiv; Grosz 1990, 107; Ramazanoglu 1993, 10). Foucault's discourse is antihierarchical. As Hennessy (1993, 43) points out, the ubiquity of power makes it impossible to explain the political force of particular discourses over others and so precludes an understanding of the hierarchical relations among discourses. Weedon (1987, 35, 110) argues that not all discourses possess the social power that comes from a secure institutional site, and discourses within fields such as the law or the family do not manifest equal power. This will be seen in the way Rosalina's and Annabel's stories were often absent and silenced in newspaper reports and in their own homes. Foucault's focus on institutions in local formations cannot explain systemic power—such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism—or elucidate the relations between such global arrangements and the local practices that sustain them (Hennessy 1993, 19-21).
3. For a discussion on domestic violence and children, see Partnerships Against Domestic Violence 1999, 13-16; 2001, 23-26; Domestic Violence Resource Centre, n.d., 1-4.

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