Review of *Buying a Bride: An Engaging History of Mail-Order Matches* by Marcia A. Zug, New York University Press, 2016, 320 pp., $30.00 (cloth)

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Working to combat "simplistic and inaccurate" (p. 1) conceptions of mail-order brides as helpless, desperate, and abused victims, Marcia A. Zug uses *Buying a Bride: An Engaging History of Mail-Order Matches* as a textual intervention into dominant U.S. cultural narratives, which she argues are tainted with misconceptions and moral judgements about this practice. In this text, Zug traces the history of mail-order brides in America from 1619 in the Jamestown colony to present times in order to address the balance of risk and reward associated with mail-order marriages. By focusing on how these marriages have historically been empowering arrangements that have helped women escape servitude while affording them economic benefits, greater gender equality, and increased social mobility, *Buying a Bride* articulates a forgotten record of women's liberation. This text also examines the role of whiteness, and xenophobia in fostering attitudes of intolerance and animosity, which work in tandem to perpetuate inaccurate narratives which associate this practice with violence, subservience, and human trafficking.

The Introduction begins by questioning dominant cultural assumptions about mail order marriages and develops the author's central thesis that mail-order marriages have had and continue to have significant benefits for both men and women in the United States. To evidence this argument, the book is divided into two sections to highlight a post-Civil War ideological shift that transformed mail-order marriages from an empowering to an oppressive concept. Part I, "When Mail-Order Brides Were Heroes," charts the antebellum belief that such arrangements were crucial to a thriving society. Part II, "Mail Order Marriage

Acquires A Bad Reputation," outlines the culture of disdain, skepticism, and criticism that developed toward this practice and continues to mask its potential benefits. The clear sections of the book demonstrate the changing perceptions of not only these arrangements, but also of love, gender, and marriage in general.

Chapter One, "Lonely Colonist Seeks Wife," discusses how the U.S. practice of mail-order marriages began in the Jamestown colony as a means to encourage men to marry, reproduce and contribute to colonial success. As many European women refused to immigrate for fear of experiencing famine or disease, the nascent colonial government began to encourage mail-order arrangements to deter marriage between white settlers and indigenous women. Many mail-order brides were awarded monetary compensation and received greater legal, economic, and property rights than they could have in seventeenth century England, and hence made rational, calculated decisions to immigrate. This chapter clearly emphasizes the benefits of mail-order marriage, but it significantly downplays how these arrangements affected indigenous peoples; Zug only briefly mentions that mail-order marriage was used by colonial governments to "displace Indian people and acquire Indian lands" (p. 29).

Chapter Two, "The Filles du Roi," and Chapter Three, "Corrections Girls and Casket Girls," highlight how the colonies esteemed whiteness, discouraged marriage between indigenous women and white settlers, and justified government interference in immigration policies that transported white women to America. Chapter Three is the only section of her book to consider potential downfalls of this practice through an examination of the traffic in women to the Louisiana colony, to which many French women convicted of theft or prostitution were sent and forced into marriage with white settlers. Zug asserts that this practice reflected government policy and hence cannot truly be considered a mail-order marriage practice. This chapter is key in examining the

detrimental effects of forced migration while exposing the crucial role whiteness played in justifying and encouraging these practices to the colonies. Chapter Four, "Well Disposed Toward the Ladies: Mail-Order Brides Go West," addresses mail-order marriage in mid-nineteenth century California and the Pacific Northwest. Zug describes such marriages as a solution to the need for labor that provided women with greater freedom through liberal property and divorce laws.

Part II of the book traces how mail order marriage practices began to acquire a negative reputation after the Civil War. Chapter Five, "Advertising for Love: The Rise of Matrimonial Advertisements," demonstrates that although the practice became more widespread and women began to have more control over the entire process, popular culture in the U.S. and U.K. continued to negatively depict advertising for spouses. Chapter Six, "Wanted—Correspondence," discusses the post-Civil War shift in the marital landscape that enticed more women, especially women of color, to enter into mail-order marriage. This occurred as part of a broader trend in which the U.S. state and local governments made only limited efforts to promote mail-order marriages after a given area reached its demographic goals. Meanwhile, public discourse focused on this practice's perceived dangers, iterating stories of murder, theft, fraud, and forceful seduction and downplaying its benefits to men, women, and the nation. This chapter illustrates a crucial shift in the acceptance of mail-order marriage as it transformed from a "mixed reputation to outright hostility" (p. 156), once women of color became the primary practitioners of this arrangement.

Chapter Seven, "Marriage at the Border," expands on this premise, arguing that relations between migrant women and women born in the United States grew increasingly hostile after the passage of the Expatriation Act (1907), which granted women citizenship upon marriage to an man who held U.S. citizenship. Women who were not U.S. citizens were perceived by some U.S. women as an obstacle to domestic feminism. Such opposition and disdain further

demonized the practice as evidenced through public dialogue from journalists, such as Natalie De Bogory, that described mail-order marriages as loveless arrangements that ensure female subservience and act as "death sentences to individuality and progress" (p. 183).

In the 1950s "golden age" of marriage, when marriage rates increased and people began to marry much younger, mail-order marriages were widely regarded as unnecessary and outdated. Feminist texts such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) prompted women to reconsider their notions of happiness and marriage and to advocate for increased access to education, civil rights, abortion, and birth control. Chapter Eight, "Mail-Order Feminism," concludes the author's history of mail-order marriages in the United States by arguing that the practice is still very much alive today, with more than 400 marriage broker agencies currently in operation (p. 189). To adjust to contemporary technology, websites are charging for things like video chats and emoticons, expenses that perpetuate the conception that men are "buying" brides. In light of its popularity, Zug argues that texts such as Mila Glodava and Richard Onizuka's *Mail Order Brides: Women for Sale* (1994) exaggerate and misinterpret domestic violence rates for mail-order marriages while literature such as Lynn Visson's *Wedded Strangers* (1998) reinforces negative stereotypes of men who seek mail-order brides as pathetic and misogynistic.

This text is an important intervention raises critical questions about the role of whiteness, xenophobia, and government in shaping the practice of mail order marriage. Although some information is repetitive, the book provides detailed historical and personal accounts, including a myriad of testimonies from individuals who have been part of mail order marriages. The author juxtaposes this data with analyses of legal and popular cultural discourse from newspapers, scholarship, films, and legislation that shaped, and were shaped by, migration associated with mail-order marriages. In tracing the transformation of the practice from one regarded as

rectifying gender disparities within settler colonialism to the contemporary perspective of mail order marriage an impediment to gender equality, *Buying a Bride* works to critically engage with popular cultural perspectives on these arrangements. By describing women as the "biggest beneficiaries of mail-order marriage" (p. 207) Zug accentuates how she views these practices as having feminist potential.

The book sometimes suffers from an intensely positive and optimistic tone, with only one chapter that provides a negative account of mail-order marriages, which makes the author's argument appear narrow and one-sided. In so doing, the author omits aspects of mail-order marriages that deserve further investigation, such as the effect mail-order marriages had on indigenous peoples during colonial times or international perceptions of its practice in the United States. Similarly, Zug concludes her work by using marriage equality as a platform to define modern marriage by choice, not love. While I find it encouraging that she included the recent popularity of mail-order practices to help same-sex couples find one another, her consideration appeared as a quick afterthought for her arguments.

Zug is careful to note that she does not suggest that mail-order marriages should become a dominant standard in U.S. society, but rather that the practice be analyzed according to its potential and its extensive history which has always carried risks and uncertainties. These consensual arrangements can offer significant economic, social, and legal benefits for women, and hence this book plays a crucial role in engaging with the intersections of feminism, imperialism, capitalism, and racism that inform the conflicted history of mail-order marriages in the United States.