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Filipinos Depicted in American Culture**Eileen Regullano**

Abstract: From the early 20th century, Filipinos have been depicted as treacherous savages or as innocent children in America, evidenced in political comics and comments from the time. In today's society, even though the depictions are not as blatantly racist as they were in the early 20th century, Filipinos are dehumanized, exoticized, or idealized and represented in a two-dimensional way. However, this construction of the Filipino identity may be starting to change with the advent of more ardent vocalization by Filipinos with regard to the production of their images.

Key words, terms, concepts, names: Filipina, Filipino, exoticize, hypersexual, yellowface, Frank Dumont, white man's burden, Gene Cajayon, Desperate Housewives, The Debut

Part of the reason Filipinos were depicted so negatively in the early 20th century was because of the global political climate and the relationship between the United States and the Philippines. Shortly after the Spanish-American War was over and the United States gained possession of the Philippines, political cartoons such as the one titled "The White Man's Burden" from *The Journal, Detroit* began to spring up, depicting the United States as a paternal figure forcibly carrying a Filipino to a schoolhouse. This image shows the Filipino as extremely dark, implying some sort of evil or savagery within him. In addition, the fact that the US is carrying the Filipino, as a father might carry his child, implies that the Filipino is naïve and innocent like a child; a depiction of the noble savage. Not only that, but the Filipino seems to be wearing a grass skirt and appears to otherwise be naked, furthering the image of the Filipino as a savage character. The forcible carrying of the Filipino to the schoolhouse (which bears an American flag at the top) implies that the Filipino is uneducated and must be taught--not by just anyone, but by Americans--as if the Filipino knows nothing. Finally, the popular phrase "The White Man's Burden" scrawled across the bottom of the image is telling of the popular ethnocentric American attitude that prevailed at the time: a paternal philosophy that because America was educated and civilized, it had a duty to its "little brown brothers" (Filipinos) to educate them.

Around the same time, a one-act skit titled *The King of the Philippine Islands*, written by blackface veteran Frank Dumont, became popular. An example of yellowface, the skit follows Willie Danger, a "colored cook" who, "through cowardice and stupidity, brings about an attack by Filipino rebels on an encampment of American soldiers" (Lee 111). Danger survives and offers the Filipinos citizenship to a made-up republic over which he rules, at which the Filipinos stop trying to cook and eat him. Danger goes on to reap the fruits of the island and eventually dies by being blown up. The representation of Filipinos as cannibals once again conjures up an image of a primitive people. This representation also serves to "corroborate David Starr Jordan's contention that the native of the tropic lacks the capacity to participate in democracy. Finally, the image of the two colored peoples coming together to form an ersatz republic underscores the need for a policy that ensures white supremacy" (Lee 111).

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Once again, we see the paternalistic idea of the White Man's Burden--the need to provide a form of government for the colored people because they can't provide one for themselves. Interestingly though, the offer of citizenship to the Filipinos mirrors the actual promises of the US to the Philippines of a free democracy. Interestingly, if one were to reinterpret the intention of this skit, these promises of citizenship to a sham republic could become a commentary on the betrayal (or at least perceived as such by Filipinos) of the US to the Philippines when it simply treated the Philippines as a colony rather than as its own sovereign republic.

A shift in the popular view of Filipinos began to arise when waves of Filipino immigrants came to the US around the 1920s and 1930s. "Anti-Filipino sentiment was rampant on the West Coast," (Min 140) as the Filipinos provided cheap labor and married white women. Filipinos were unable to own land (Min 140) and faced discrimination in many arenas. Many writers, such as the famous Filipino immigrant Carlos Bulosan, would later write about these experiences, while it is difficult to find any information on these sorts of incidents written by non-Filipinos (i.e. coverage in the news, etc.). Bulosan's novel *America is in the Heart*, published in 1943, included an incident in which a family comprised of a Filipino husband, a white American wife and their baby were refused service in a restaurant, the proprietor saying, "You goddamn brown monkeys have your nerve, marrying our women. Now get out of this town!" (Bulosan 144-145) The proprietor hit him and the Filipino retaliated; the proprietor and other white men in the restaurant proceeded to beat the Filipino until the two deputy sheriffs came to take him away. It reflects the high tensions between white Americans and Filipino-Americans at this time, making it clear that discrimination against Filipino-Americans was culturally acceptable. This is especially seen in the fact that the two sheriffs came to take the Filipino man away and not the white men who ganged up on and beat him. Bulosan's heart-wrenching depiction of this incident attempts to humanize and make real the discrimination with which Filipino-Americans had to deal.

A picture taken c. 1930 in Stockton credited to Sprague Talbott, made into a poster, also deals with the discrimination Filipino-Americans faced in the 1920s and 1930s. The photograph depicts a door with a sign saying "POSITIVELY NO FILIPINOS ALLOWED," and was later made into a poster with the caption, "WELCOME TO AMERICA" printed underneath the photograph. This representation of the invisible discrimination the Filipinos had to deal with is a stark, cynical one that neither romanticizes nor overly victimizes the Filipino. It is a realistic representation and commentary with these words added below the photograph.

Blatant discrimination against Filipinos (or anyone, for that matter) is rarely depicted clearly on television these days. However, in the 2007 premiere of the popular television series *Desperate Housewives*, Teri Hatcher's character is getting treated in the hospital and says, "Can I check those diplomas, because I want to make sure they're not from some med school in the Philippines." Filipinos were outraged by this comment. Personally, I vividly remember when this comment was made because my parents are Filipino doctors. They and all their colleagues, when they heard about this incident, were outraged that the ABC network would allow a comment like that to go on the air. Petitions, text messages, emails and phone calls were flying everywhere among the Filipino-American community when this occurred. How could any primetime television show allow such a comment to slip past censors? This racist joke really hit home for me and for many Filipino-Americans across the nation. ABC later apologized, saying, "There was no intent to disparage the integrity of any aspect of the medical community in the Philippines. As leaders in broadcast diversity, we are committed to presenting sensitive and respectful images of all communities featured in our programs." But by the time ABC apologized, the damage had already been done; my parents and all of their friends still boycott the ABC network to this day because of that comment. Frankly, if ABC were really "committed to presenting sensitive and respectful images of all communities," it wouldn't have let a joke like this slip through. The same sort of joke would probably not be tolerated for other minorities such as the African-American or Hispanic communities. That this comment could be construed as a joke at all says something

about the ethnocentrism still prevalent in American popular culture today that assumes that medical schools not in the Western world are inferior.

As a Filipino-American, I am directly affected by the representations of Filipinos in popular culture, and some of the most pervasive representations of Filipinos in popular culture come from jokes, like the one made on *Desperate Housewives*, and common stereotypes of Filipinos. I don't know what it's like not to have people make jokes around me like, "Don't leave her alone with your dog or else she'll eat him!" These jokes aren't always aimed at Filipinos by non-Filipinos, as in *Desperate Housewives*; within any community self-stereotyping is certainly a common experience that often serves to unify communities, especially those in the diaspora. A well-known (among Filipinos) example of this self-stereotyping is a "quiz" on the Internet titled, "Are You Really Filipino?" The quiz consists of a list of jokes about what Filipinos often do, say or have. (See Appendix A) These self-representations of the Filipino identity were intended originally to unify Filipinos using these culturally based behaviors as a "common root among all Filipinos" (Ignacio 131). However, some Filipinos denounced this list as a bad representation of Filipino culture. Someone from the Filipino-American newspaper *Philippine News* reacted to the list, saying that it is "'self-deprecating' and hurtful to the Filipino community." (Ignacio 132) This assessment is accurate in that this list can easily be misconstrued and used to essentialize Filipino culture rather than to acknowledge certain aspects of it (an "aberrant reading" as described in Martinez's writings on the construction of anthropological knowledge). When I first saw this list, as a 2nd-generation Filipino-American, I actually reacted in both ways. While I could relate to many of the descriptions of "Filipinoness" in the list, there were probably just as many to which I could not relate. The effect of only relating to half of the list resulted in, on the one hand, being able to feel like I was part of the Filipino community. On the other hand, the traits I could not relate to made me think at that young age that those traits defined Filipinos; I naïvely thought that true Filipinos had to do, say or have most or all items on the list. The effect of feeling half-in and half-out of the community allowed me to experience both the sense of community building that this representation of Filipinos offered and the feeling of being an outsider. Because the list was compiled by Filipinos, I didn't question the validity of the list, resulting in my own projection of essentialization.

This essentialization of Filipinos can also be seen in a similar list of jokes posted online by a self-identified white American male titled "You May Be Married to a Filipina If." (See Appendix B) This list of jokes is more problematic than the previous example because not only does it essentialize Filipinos (women in particular) in a condescending manner, but it also objectifies and exoticizes the "Filipina" (Filipino woman). The author feels the need to state explicitly after the title that he "loves his Filipina wife *in spite of* the following idiosyncrasies" (emphasis added). The author's ethnocentric attitude is evident here in his belief that the things defining his wife as "Filipina" are negative attributes he must overlook in his marriage. His condescension toward Filipinos and Filipino culture is also obvious in his wording. For example, the man describes that "Her friends are named Chinky, Girlie, Boy, and Bimbo and you are not allowed to smirk." His desire to smirk at these common Filipino nicknames betrays disrespect for Filipinos in general, and shows a level of condescension that is quite offensive. However, the most offensive item in this list is the last: "...You are pretty proud of yourself because you think that you snagged up for yourself some unique, rare, tropical goddess type until you go to the Philippines and can't tell her apart from anyone else in the whole country." The comment dehumanizes and exoticizes the Filipina; when I read the descriptors "unique, rare, [and] tropical," I could have easily thought the author was talking about birds. He idealizes the Filipina, putting her on the same level as a "goddess," rather than treating her as a person. Even worse, he lumps all Filipinas together; they are all basically faceless to the author; again essentializing the Filipina.

The exoticism and idealization of Filipino women apparent in this list by an American man is hardly uncommon in American popular culture. Films, television and literature perpetuate the stereotype of Filipino women as ideal

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lovers who are hypersexual. Emily Ignacio describes how she and several of her Filipina friends "have also felt the effects of and have been subjected to many media images of Filipino women (and Asian women) as hypersexual: 'Hey! Are you Vietnamese? Filipina? Are you guys as good in bed as that chick in 9 1/2 weeks? Me so horny!'" (Ignacio 83) In the Canadian teenage drama series *Degrassi* (included here because it was aired in and popular in the United States), the Filipino character Manny represents this stereotype of the hypersexual Filipina, as well as others. Manny begins the series as innocent and cute, then is told she should change her image when she complains that everyone only ever sees her as cute. Afterwards, she begins hypersexualizing herself, wearing skimpy clothes and allowing her thongs to be visible above her jeans. These two extremes in her image represent the aforementioned stereotype of Filipinas as slutty nymphomaniacs, and also in the beginning of the series the common stereotype that any Asian girl is cute, innocent and shy. Throughout the series, this image of Manny as hypersexualized is perpetuated in several situations, such as when she becomes pregnant (and gets an abortion) and when she gets drunk and strips in front of a camera.

After this last incident, Manny's father kicks her out of the house. This also upholds the stereotype of a powerful, intimidating Filipino father figure, presented in this case as a villain. Yet later in the series, Manny locks horns with her father in her desire to be an actress and his wishes for her to become an educated young lady. Eventually, her father gives in but insists she pursue an education. They come to a compromise where she will major in theater but maintain a minor in science. Finally, we see an example of Filipino representation in the media in which a Filipino stereotype is somewhat deconstructed. The image of an intimidating Filipino patriarch is dispelled when Manny's father softens enough to allow his daughter to study theater. In this example we also see a stereotypical situation that is common among Filipino families, portrayed in the struggle between parent and child over career choices, though it is not resolved in a stereotypical fashion. Stereotypically, the child would lose the situation and follow what the father had prescribed. In this case, however, they become somewhat equal as they negotiate a compromise for the situation.

A similar conflict can be seen in the movie *The Debut*, conceived and directed by Filipino-American Gene Cajayon. The main character, Filipino-American Ben Mercado, wishes to become an artist, while his father, Roland, pushes him to become a doctor. Unlike in *Degrassi*, the Filipino father is a well-constructed, rounded character. *Degrassi* leaves the motivations behind the father's harsh behavior vague, and leave him as a rather flat character. *The Debut*, on the other hand, clearly shows that Roland's harsh behavior toward his son is not simply cruelty or stubbornness; rather, he is driven by his desire to see his children succeed after the sacrifices he has made trying to give them a better life than the one he led in the Philippines. This is one of the real issues facing Filipino-Americans that the film explores and represents, and it does so without romanticizing, victimizing or otherwise objectifying the Filipino. I believe this is the reason why it was so successful in the Filipino community despite having been a self-distributed, independent movie.

The Debut is the only example of a film I have ever encountered that I feel doesn't treat Filipinos this way, and is also the only film I have seen that had a Filipino-American director and writer and a predominantly Filipino or Filipino-American cast. *The Debut* is a good example of why "indigenous media" is so valuable, as discussed in Ruby's *Picturing Culture*. The Filipinos in the film are not flat, two-dimensional characters; they are not shown as the noble savage or as primitive beings, and they are not exoticized or idealized, as opposed to many representations of Filipinos made by Westerners that do.

This is not to say that Filipinos will never exoticize or condescend in representations of other Filipinos. Certainly in Bulosan's novel there are times when I feel he is romanticizing his cultural heritage. However, in my personal

experience I have encountered many more dehumanizing representations of Filipinos produced by non-Filipinos than produced by Filipinos.

Of course, my own identity as a Filipino-American may bias my views on the issue of Filipino representation in American culture despite my best attempts to remain (relatively) objective, so some reflexivity is warranted here. I grew up in a culture that had latent resentment toward Westerners--Americans especially, for historical reasons--and this may affect my views on the subject. It is also hard to evaluate just how much bias has made its way into this paper because there is very little scholarship on the specific issue of representation of Filipinos in American culture, and of the few resources available on the issue were produced by Filipinos or Filipino-Americans themselves. This being said, I would like to acknowledge again that Filipinos may sometimes dehumanize themselves, but examples of this are not nearly as prevalent or influential as those produced by non-Filipinos, in general.

Over time, representation of Filipinos has changed to fit contemporary audiences. However, for the most part Filipinos are still dehumanized and essentialized. Rather than being shown as noble savages these days based off physical appearance and lack of technology in the Philippines, Filipinos are essentialized and stereotyped according to culturally based behaviors. A step forward, away from the overly simplified portrayal of Filipinos in American culture, is exemplified in the film *The Debut*, which was directed and written by Filipino-Americans, and also had a predominantly Filipino and Filipino-American cast. The movie successfully presents Filipinos in a way that humanizes them, portraying them as a people with struggles: just like any other. The image of Filipinos in American culture needs to continue to be reconstructed in a way that will present them in a more humanistic light through a bigger voice of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in cultural artifacts and mediums. Perhaps in a similar way the negative depictions of all minorities can be dispelled.

Appendix A: Are You Really Filipino?

Are you confused about your ethnic identity? Want to know just how Filipino you are? Take this less-than-scientific quiz to rate your "Filipinoness."

SCORING

3 points if you can relate to the following characteristics yourself

2 points if it relates to an immediate family member, i.e., Mom or Dad or sister/brother

1 point if you know someone who has the characteristic

MANNERISM AND PERSONALITY TRAITS:

1. You point with your lips.
2. You eat using hands--and have it down to a technique.
3. Your other piece of luggage is a Balikbayan box.
4. You always have at least three other people taking you to the airport.

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5. You're standing next to eight big boxes at the airport.
6. You not upwards to greet someone
7. You put your foot up on your chair and rest your elbow on your knee while eating.
8. You use a rock to scrub yourself in the shower.
9. You have to kiss your relative on the cheek [sic] as soon as you enter the room.
10. You collect items from hotels or restaurants "for souvenire." [sic]
11. You smile for no reason.
12. You flirt by having a foolish grin in your face while raising your eyebrows repeatedly.
13. You go to a department store and try to bargain the prices.
14. You use an umbrella for shade on hot summer days.
15. You scratch your head when you don't know the answer.
16. You never eat the last morsel of food on the table.
17. You like bowling.
18. You know how to play pusoy and mah-jong.
19. You find dried up morsels of rice stuck on your shirt.
20. You prefer to sit in the shade instead of basking in the sun.
21. You add an unwarranted "H" to your name, i.e., "Jhun," "Bhoy," "Rhon."
22. You put your hands together in front of you as if to make a path and say "Excuse, excuse" when you pass between people or in front of the TV.
23. Your middle name is your mother's maiden name.
24. You like everything imported or "state-side."
25. You check the labels on clothes to see where it was made before buying it.
26. You hang your clothes out to dry.
27. You are perfectly comfortable in a squatting position with your elbows resting on your knees.
28. You consistently arrive 30 minutes late for all events.

29. You always offer food to all your visitors.

VOCABULARY:

30. You pronounce F's like P's and P's like F's.

31. You say "comfort room" instead of "bathroom."

32. You say "for take out" instead of "to go."

33. You "open" or "close" the light.

34. You asked for "Colgate" instead of "Toothpaste."

35. You asked for a "Pentel-pen" or a "ball-pen" instead of just "pen."

36. You refer to the refrigerator as the "ref" or "pridyider."

37. You say "Kodakan" instead of "take a picture."

38. You order a "McDonald's" instead of "hamburger" (pronounced ham-boor-ger).

39. You say "Ha?" instead of "What."

40. You say "Hoy" to get someone's attention.

41. You answer when someone yells "Hoy."

42. You turn around when someone says "Psst!"

43. You say "Cutex" instead of "nail polish."

44. You say "he" when you mean "she" and vice versa.

45. You say "array" instead of "ouch."

46. Your sneeze sounds like "ahh-ching" instead of "ahh-choo."

47. You prefer to make acronyms for phrases such as "OA" for overreacting, or "TNT" for, well, you know.

48. You say "air con" instead of "a/c" or air conditioner.

49. You say "brown-out" instead of "black-out."

HOME FURNISHING:

50. You use a "walis ting-ting" or "walis tambo" as opposed to a conventional broom.

51. You have a "Weapons of Moroland" shield hanging in the living room wall.

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52. You have a portrait of "The Last Supper" hanging in your dining room.
53. You own a Karaoke System.
54. You own a piano that no one ever plays.
55. You have a tabo in the bathroom.
56. Your house has too many burloloys.
57. You have two to three pairs of tsinelas at your doorstep.
58. Your house has an ornate wrought iron gate in front of it.
59. You have a rose garden.
60. You have a shrine of the Santo Ninyo in your living room.
61. You own a "barrel man" (you pull up the barrel and you see something that looks familiar, schwing).
62. You cover your living room furniture with bedsheets.
63. Your lamp shades still have the plastic covers on them.
64. You have plastic runners to cover the carpets in your house.
65. You refer to your VCR as a "beytamax."
66. You have a rice dispenser.
67. You own a turbo broiler.
68. You own one of those fiber optic flower lamps.
69. You own a lamp with the oil that drips down the strings.
70. You have a giant wooden fork and spoon hanging somewhere in the dinning [sic] room.
71. You have wooden tinikling dancers on the wall.
72. You own capiz shells chandeliers, lamps, or placemats.

AUTOMOBILES:

73. You own a Mercedes Benz and you call it "chedeng."
74. You own a huge van conversion.
75. Your car chirps like a bird or plays a tune when it is in reverse.

76. Your car horn can make 2 or 3 different sounds.
77. Your car has curb feelers or curb detectors.
78. Your car has too many "buroloys" like a Jitneys back in P.I.
79. You hang a Rosary on your car's rear view mirror.
80. You have an air freshener in your car.

FAMILY:

81. You have aunts and uncles named "Baby," "Girlie," or "Boy."
82. You were raised to believe that every Filipino is an aunt, uncle, or cousin.
83. Your dad was in the Navy.
84. You have a family member or relative that works in the Post Office.
85. Your mom or sister or wife is a nurse.
86. Your parents call each other "mommy" and "daddy," or "ma" and "pa."
87. You have a family member that has a nickname that repeats itself, i.e., "Deng-Deng," "Ling Ling," or "Bing Bing." Etc.

FOOD:

88. You put hot dogs in your spaghetti.
89. You consider dilis the Filipino equivalent of French fries.
90. You think that eating chocolate rice pudding and dried fish is a great morning meal.
91. You order things like tapsilog, tocilog, or longsilog at restaurants.
92. You instinctively grab a toothpick after a meal.
93. You order a "soft drink" instead of a "soda."
94. You dip bread in your morning coffee.
95. You refer to seasonings and all other forms of monosodium glutamate as "Ajinomoto."
96. Your cupboards are full of Spam, Vienna Sausage, Ligo, and Corned Beef, which you refer to as Karne Norte.
97. "Goldilocks" means more to you than just a character in a fairytale.

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98. You appreciate a fresh pot of rice.
99. You bring your "baon" most of the time to work.
100. Your "baon" is usually something over rice.
101. Your neighbors complain about the smell of tuyo on Sunday mornings.
102. You eat rice for breakfast.
103. You use your fingers to measure the water when cooking rice.
104. You wash and re-use disposable plastic utensils and Styrofoam cups.
105. You have a supply of frozen lumpia in the refrigerator.
106. You have an ice shaver for making a halo-halo.
107. You eat purple yam flavored ice cream.
108. You gotta have a bottle of Jufran or Mafram handy.
109. Your fry Spam or hot dogs and eat them with rice.
110. You think that half-hatched duck eggs are a delicacy.
111. You know that "chocolate meat" is not really made with chocolate.

BONUS QUESTION;

You understand this joke (make sure you read the punch line with a Filipino accent!):

How many bears were in a car with Goldilocks?

Four--the momma bear, the poppa bear, the baby bear, and the driver.

Tally your scores and see what category you belong.

259-327 points: Welcome to America! Judging from your high score, you are an obvious (something) from the Philippines. There's no doubt what your ethnic identity is! You're a Filipino, through and through.

173-258 points: Congratulations, you've retained most of the Filipino traits and tendencies your family has instilled in you.

172-151 points: You have OFT (Obvious Filipino Tendencies). Go with the flow to (something) Filipino potential. Prepare for assimilation; resistance is futile!

50 and under: You're white, aren't you?

Appendix B: You May Be Married to a Filipina If...

(written by an American guy who loves his Filipina wife in spite of the following idiosyncrasies)

*Instead of a dowry, you got the whole bill for the wedding and the honeymoon.

*Most of the decorations in your house are made of wicker.

*You are expected to be able to read her mind just by watching her eyebrows move up and down and which way her lips are pointed.

All her relatives think your name is Joe.

Your in-laws take 10 years to acknowledge your existence and to call you by something other than "that white guy."

The instant you are married you have 3,000 new close relatives that you can't tell apart.

Your refrigerator is always full but you cannot find any food that you recognize.

All the desserts are sticky and all the snacks are salty.

You throw a party and everyone is fighting to chop the leathery skin off a roast pig.

All your kids have 4-5 middle names.

You try to call her up on the phone and someone tells you "for a while," and you want to know "for a while, what?"

You are trying to go to sleep and she keeps asking for the comFORT'r, and you ain't got a clue what she's talking about.

Your phone bills are all international and average 3 hours per call.

She sweeps with something that witches usually fly around on.

The rice cooker is on 24 hours a day and uses up 50% of your electric and food budget.

On your first trip to the Philippines, you have 18 giant boxes that weigh 1,000 pounds each and your "carry on" luggage requires a small forklift truck.

The first time she's pregnant you have to go out at 4:00 in the A.M. for some weird type of greasy sausages.

You buy a new \$500 freezer so she can store 200 pounds of SPAM that was on sale.

Everything in your house was bought on sale, even if you don't need it as long as it was a "bargain" is all that matters.

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All your postage bills instantly double.

Her favorite sauce is called "patis," Americans call it turpentine.

She prefers bistek to beef steak.

She'll offer you a halo-halo with 2 straws for a romantic dessert.

You still don't know what's the difference between manong and manok.

Her homeland has more Megamalls than islands.

Before every holiday and visit, her sisters fax you a 10 page "bilins" list which says suggestion only.

Your kitchen table has a merry-go-round in the middle.

All the vegetables she buys at the Filipino store look like they were grown at Chernobyl.

Your in law's first visit lasted 6 years.

Her friends are named Chinky, Girlie, Boy, and Bimbo and you are not allowed to smirk.

All your place settings have the silverware backwards and there are no knives.

She's done her best job planning a surprise party for you if she manages not to tell you about it until a week or two before.

She "cleans" her closet by throwing all the crap into your closet.

You were married 5 years before she explained to you that "ARAY!" doesn't mean "ohh baby!"

And last but not least: You are pretty proud of yourself because you think that you snagged up for yourself some unique, rare, tropical goddess type until you go to the Philippines and can't tell her apart from anyone else in the whole country (unless she's taller than 5'1", then it's a bit easier)

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