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Maria Yoon

BY EILEEN CONDON

Rites of passage—whether coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, birthday celebrations, or wakes—mark changes in status. Like the social categories they reinforce, rites of passage reduce cultural anxieties and maintain order. When people don't seem to be moving from one of these states into the next, tensions can erupt. People may feel fear or sadness, anger or guilt. Neighbors may whisper. Parents may fret at the dinner table. Children may comply or rebel. Korean-born, New York City-based educator and performance artist Maria Yoon has been married forty-four times now, and she's only in her mid-thirties. Getting married—in every state of the union—is her primary focus at present, but not in the way her parents might have anticipated.

With a B.F.A. from Cooper Union, Maria serves as a teaching artist for New York City museums. Since 2001 she has also been working on a multimedia performance series entitled “Maria the Korean Bride” (MTKB). MTKB will soon be a documentary film, designed to bring attention to and explore the social pressures Maria experiences as an unmarried first-generation Korean American woman. “Maria the Korean Bride” is happening on the road all over the United States, where Maria has met, interviewed, and married numerous Americans in a series of realistic and surrealistic ceremonial wedding performances, such as the 2009 Alaskan wedding pictured here (photo: Ivan Bacon). The participants learn about traditional Korean bridal costume (*hwarot*) and wedding customs, and Maria learns about marriage as it is enacted across the United States. Maria says the project is about resisting social pressure, but it's also about celebrating and exploring many forms of marriage.

I asked Maria where the idea came from. “My own parents inspired me, especially when we would argue at the dinner table, especially during major holidays. They would always ask me, ‘Why aren't you married?! What have we done wrong that you are still not married?’” “I hear these days, Koreans in Korea get divorced and think twice about having children,”



Maria adds. “However, for first- and second-generation Korean Americans, we face bigger pressure, because our parents have left their native land and oftentimes they cling very tightly to those customs left behind.”

She hopes her project will assist anyone contemplating marriage. “Some might argue marriage is an outdated subject. In the Asian community marriage is very often discussed, and young Asian women hear every day from their parents and community that it is very serious social institution and obligation.” Nevertheless, marriage is not for everyone, she believes.

While the project has attracted hundreds of supporters and participants—t-shirts are for sale on Maria's website that say, “I Married Maria the Korean Bride”—Maria says she does get flak for questioning the institution of marriage:

In New Hampshire, a reverend wrote me expressing his interest in participating. He asked me to meet with him at his church upon my arrival. When I arrived, he was busy lecturing about how what I was doing was wrong . . . marriage is a sacred thing. Another was in Vermont, where I had asked maple farm owners to participate as I married one of their maple trees. They were all thrilled and happy to help, until they realized how accepting I am of civil unions and same-sex marriage. They asked me to not include them in my footage for my final feature documentary.

So Maria counters the pressure with humor. Garbed in *hwarot*, she has boldly proposed to and “married” numerous men and a few women, various animals (a Kentucky racehorse and a black Angus bull), and plants. She has visited the Liberty Bell in Philly, a Vodou temple in Louisiana, Elvis's White Wedding Chapel in Nevada, Confederate monuments in the south, cornfields in Iowa, and retirement communities in Florida.

I inquired whether Maria's mock marriages have made her more or less interested in getting legally married somewhere, to someone, someday. “Well, I still get the jitters before getting married, even in a mock ceremony. I don't really know what this means. Maybe it's STILL not my time yet.”

Maria had as of this writing only a few more states to go—Montana, Idaho, South and North Dakota, and Wyoming. Stay tuned at www.mariathekoreanbride.com. She plans a grand finale in New York City in December 2010, along with a screening of the documentary.

Everyone is invited. ▼

Eileen Condon is project director at the Center for Traditional Music and Dance in New York City. To nominate a colleague for “In Praise of Women,” contact her at econdon@ctmd.org.



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