MEDIATIONS AND TRANSMEDIATIONS
Erotics, Sociality, and “Asia”

On January 18, 2007, the Indian government banned the satellite television channel AXN, a unit of the Sony Entertainment Network, claiming that its telecast of the program World’s Sexiest Advertisements was “likely to adversely affect public morality.” Although the ban was lifted on March 1, it was only one of a series of protests launched by the state, political parties, and civic groups anxious about how transnational public culture was allegedly contaminating Indian culture. For instance, in April 2007, when the Hollywood star Richard Gere kissed the Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty at an AIDS awareness event in Delhi, angry mobs responded by burning effigies of Gere and Shetty for “spreading obscenity.” Meanwhile, in China, Beijing law enforcement officials had to drop charges in a three-year case against a woman who had initiated nude Internet chats using her webcam on the grounds that nude chat rooms were “not defined” in China’s pornography laws. But in the same month, the Ministry of Public Security launched a major six-month campaign to purge pornography from the Chinese Internet, the vice minister of public security alleging that “the inflow of pornographic materials from abroad and lax domestic controls [were] to blame for the existing problems in China’s cyberspace.”

These bursts of outrage and efforts at regulation do more than signal how imputed eroticisms can become lightning rods for battles over cultural authenticity. Going beyond journalistic clichés that fetishize the purported incitements and repressions of the exotic East (“What became of the land of the Kama Sutra?” screamed the headline of a First Post article about the Indian government’s ban on AXN), these instantiations of moral panic high-
light the entwining of the pleasures and anxieties surrounding erotics, soci-
ality, and transnational media.

In this volume we engage the intersections of transnational media, erotics,
and identity within Asia and across Asian diasporas. The global traffic in
images and texts across Asia and its diasporas is hardly a new phenomenon,
and it is not our intent to exceptionalize the present historical moment.
Yet it would be a mistake to underestimate the monumental changes in the
scale and reach of transnational media over the course of the past three de-
cades. The media texts we cover in this volume range from highly amateur
and grassroots forms to professional and globally dominant forms. They in-
clude media such as cinema, radio, satellite television, popular novels, and
“self health” literature, as well as media that do not necessarily circulate on
a mass scale, such as video, the Internet, and zines. Our methods are simi-
larly multifarious, comprising studies of production as well as audience re-
ception, attending both to modalities of media use and to the more ineffable
process of meaning-making.

We do not ascribe singular or totalizing power to transnational media
in the construction or reshaping of erotics. Nor do we claim that mediated
erotics supplant or replace “prior” forms. Instead, we are concerned with
how mediated erotics are both embedded within and constitute sociality at
the present historical moment; thus, for instance, mediated erotics refract
formations of race, class, and caste so as to redraw axes of social inequality.
Going beyond approaches to media that are reflectionist (“media reflect
what is going on in society and culture”) or behaviorist (“media affect be-
havior in such-and-such a manner”), we explore the myriad ways media im-
plicate cognition, affect, and the body so as to problematize the boundaries
between the psychic and the corporeal. Indeed, mediated erotics recast—as
well as trouble—normative constructions of the body and of corporeality:
pulsating out of iPods, flickering across television screens and computer
monitors, casting flirtatious glances at us from billboards, mediated erotics
create sensoria and generate patterns of intimacy that confound assump-
tions about propinquity and distance, physicality and virtuality. Through
their (often discontinuous) itineraries across region and nation, mediated
erotics enable forms of affect and reimagined sodalities that variously trans-
gress and reinscribe dominant notions of community and identity. In a plu-
rality of sites, mediated erotics participate in renewed forms of place-making
through boundary-crossing and the reification of cultural difference; the de-
sires spawned by media erotics enable new modes of physical and imagina-
tive travel for migrants and for consumers of globalized popular culture.
Prevailing conceptions of Asia conjure an eroticized space formed through desires and anxieties embedded in “the Western gaze.” Conventions of eroticizing Asia hark back to the discourses chronicled in Saidian Orientalism (1980) and persist into the current era, in which Asian bodies come in for disproportionate porn representation online, pulling in a staggering 25 to 30 percent of revenues in a multibillion-dollar industry (Tu 2003, 267). We draw attention to how Asia and Asian diasporas have become sites for the production of a multiplicity of media texts that circulate on a transnational scale, such as sexually explicit Japanese manga, pornography, video, Bollywood cinema, a booming print industry of zines, documentary and travel video, magazines, novels, and satellite television. As these mediated texts travel across different “cultural contexts” they participate, organically and foundationally, in the construction of particular kinds of spaces and temporalities. How then do contemporary assemblages of media and erotics enable the reconfiguration of “Asia” itself?

Our book resonates with the continuing importance—perhaps the resurgence—of Asia on many discursive and political registers. There is little doubt that much of the discourse on “rising” or “emerging” Asia is mediated by the interests of globalized capital (as in the excitement surrounding emerging markets) and the imperatives and anxieties of U.S. and European imperial interests. (Asia, after all, is a site where the war on terror has been waged.) Our objective is to foreground the contemporary reconfiguration of Asia through its intensifying centrality to circuits of transnational cultural traffic. In our conception, Asia emerges as an unstable signifier as well as a palimpsest of discrepant genealogies, temporalities, and histories.

Our analyses reflect the spatial reconfigurations produced by migration, the peregrinations of transnational media, and the global traffic in capital and commodities. These analyses include studies of zines among dispersed gay and lesbian communities across Indonesia, traveling tales of erotic liaisons between Western men and Japanese women and men, the forging of virtual communities of intimacy and longing between European or American men and Filipina and Chinese women, an internationally celebrated documentary that circulates the story of Indian children photographing their lives, and video evocations of the nostalgic fantasies of Hmong American men about “homeland” women. Our approach is not to compile “case studies” of different instantiations of erotics in distinct field sites. Instead, while scrupulously preserving the cultural, political, and historical specificities of each of these conjunctures, these chapters, taken as a whole, construct a “transnational analytics” (Grewal, Gupta, and Ong 1999) by representing the
discontinuous, nonteleological, yet unmistakable, changes occurring across diverse media-saturated cultural landscapes throughout Asia and its diasporas.

Transnational media constitute complex relationships between erotic yearning and other desires and fantasies. Our focus is on a crucial dimension of what has been called the social practice (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002) of transnational media: its constitutive role in the realm of erotics. The social locations of producers and consumers, the politics of enunciation refracting the diverse modes of address deployed by specific genres of media, the narrative repertoires on which media texts draw, and the semiotic skills of audiences and consumers crucially inflect mediated erotics. At the same time, however, sharp discontinuities might exist between authorial intentions and the interpretive negotiations of audiences, readers, and consumers. We explore the intertextualities that refract the myriad meanings that media texts acquire as they become sites of “intimate habitation” for subjects living in specific historical and cultural milieus (Mankekar 2005).

We locate erotics in terms of its imbrication with other desires and processes of subject formation. Erotic desire—or, for that matter, erotic revulsion—undoubtedly shapes behavior and social practices, even in those instances where it is not overtly manifest. As Anne Allison points out, “Desire is both of and beyond the everyday . . . desire is something that segues both into and out of the realities of everyday life” (1996, xiii). If, as in theoretical frameworks influenced by Freud and Lacan, desire is by definition unsatiable (on the impossibility of satisfying desire, see Freud 1961 and Lacan 1977; see also Žižek 1989), then to what end is desire actively incited and sustained by media in conjunction with other social institutions such as the state, structures of family and kinship, and the demands of labor and capital (Foucault 1985; Stoler 1995; see also Allison 1996, xv)? How, for example, are erotic desires produced by media articulated with the desire for commodities (Haug 1986; see also Curtis 2004, and Mankekar, this volume), fused with nostalgia for the homeland, or inseparable from longings for modernity?

Media at a Transnational Scale

Scholars have long pointed to how the expansion of transnational media has resulted in the creation of a “new communications geography” (Morley and Robins 1995, 1) and in realignments of local/global relations (Ang 1996; Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a; Hannerz 1996; Mankekar 2005; Morley 1992). As David Morley and Kevin Robins point out, “At the heart
of these historical developments is a process of spatial restructuring and reconfiguration. . . . It involves at once a transformation of the spatial matrix of society and of the subjective experience of, and orientation to, space and spatiality” (1995, 26). Not surprisingly, scholarly and popular discourses on transnational media are replete with tropes of spatiality: consider, for instance, the ubiquity of terms like circuits, flows, movements, trajectories, transmission, channels, local/global, translocal, regional, transnational, transborder, borders, boundaries, mobility, and fixity (see also Mankekar 2008). Theorizing the work of transnational media, then, requires a conceptual framework informed by a “geographic imagination” (Morley and Robins 1995, 26).

James Clifford’s (1997) central metaphor of “routes” is useful here for charting the particularities of media mobilities. Yet the emphasis on following routes should not be permitted to elide the functioning of places—cities, regions, homelands, and so forth—as dynamic processes, as congeries of social relations (Massey 1993, 66–67) that are at once constituted and transacted by media. As Tom Boellstorff insightfully points out in his analysis of transnational media in Indonesia, “A set of fragmented cultural elements from mass media is transformed in unexpected ways in the Indonesian context, transforming that ‘context’ itself in the process” (2003b, 41). Similarly, it is impossible to conceive of the mediascapes created by technologies like the Internet as separate from the virtual communities they engender (see Constable, this volume).

Transnational media refashion cartographies of desire keyed to geographical and virtual places. For instance, media productions of “the West” as a place of sexual freedom powerfully shape the construction of sexual normativities in many parts of the “non-Western” world (in this volume, Boellstorff, Mankekar, and Everett Yuehong Zhang offer analyses of these processes in Indonesia, India, and China, respectively). In such instances, rather than “homogenizing” cultural difference, media may accentuate and, on occasion, re-create cultural difference through the consolidation of boundaries between “the West” and “the non-West.” The role of the consumption of Western pornography in redrawing South Asian parameters of normative sex, as documented by Heather Dell (2005) and Mark Liechty (2001), is a particularly apt case in point.

When people move, other sensibilities may come into play. Erotics may be conjured not only by the boundary-marking sketched above, but also by the crossing of boundaries. One example is media-saturated nostalgia touring among members of diasporic communities, inspired by imaginaries of
homelands generated out of the interplay of media and memory (Marks 2000; Naficy 1993; Schein 2002). In the case of the Hmong diaspora, where homeland place-making is entangled with the production of mediated sexualities, “transnational erotics remix sex and space, refashioning the most intimate of interiorities. Physical distance and proximity come to be complexly articulated in the contours of homeland desire” (Schein, this volume). The erotic is produced at the fecund site of border crossings—these become spaces of both incitement and subjectification.

While attending to such spatial promiscuities, the study of transnational media likewise articulates with more structured models of global space and media power. Landmark studies have documented such structures, including Raymond Williams’s (1974, 29–36) classic study of television, which detailed the penetration of U.S. broadcasting interest into non-Western countries and its foundational role in the promotion of market capitalism; Herbert Schiller’s (1989) and Ben Bagdikian’s (2004) trenchant critiques of the monopolization of media ownership; and Toby Miller’s (1998) concept of the “new international division of cultural labor” in which U.S. media corporations outsource production to more inexpensive sites. There are myriad instances in which the powered structure of transnational media has resulted in the “import” not just of texts and commodities but of potent and hegemonic representations of modernity, progress, the market, pleasure, the self, and intimacy.

Transnational media, however, do not float over regions of the world to land like alien spaceships in “a culture.” They confound models of cultural or media imperialism (see Boyd-Barrett 1977; Mattelart 1979; Tomlinson 1991) that reproduce assumptions of the spatial and temporal distinctness, even purity, of local cultures—seen as static and atemporal—versus media, which are seen as mobile and colonizing. As several scholars have affirmed, the expansion of transnational media cannot be conceptualized in terms of teleological unilinearity (Ang 1996; Appadurai 1996; Mankekar 1999; Morley 1992; Morley and Robins 1995). Take, for instance, the resounding success of STAR TV in catering to regional markets across South Asia and East Asia; the increasing appeal of Bollywood cinema among audiences in sites as disparate as Nigeria, Israel, Great Britain, the former Soviet Union, and China; the emergence of “regional” media that circulate both transregionally and transnationally; and the ever-growing significance and influence of media forms such as zines and video, which crisscross geographically dispersed communities instead of being produced and circulated on a mass scale.5 These changes have been far from uniform across Asia (or the rest of the
world), affirming Inderpal Grewal, Akhil Gupta, and Aihwa Ong’s argument that “what counts as transnational appears very different in distinct geographical and spatial settings” (1999, 653).

The dramatic expansion in the reach and scale of transnational media over the past several decades has been enabled by specific developments in technology, such as the spread of satellite technologies and the Internet; economic shifts in the organization of global capital that in turn have led to the reorganization of media industries throughout the world; political and legal changes resulting in the regulation and deregulation of media industries; and tensions between the respective agendas of multinational capital and specific nation-states. Attempts to characterize these shifts run into apparent contradictions. Without doubt, the neoliberal era has seen a dramatic consolidation and privatization of media ownership. As Robert McChesney argues, what is most pronounced is the intensification of corporate influence in media policymaking, specifically the ceding of the regulation of media to the market (2004, 48–56). Equally important, and perhaps more fundamental to our conception of mediated erotics, media industries serve the market by promoting the ideological construct of “freedom” (Harvey 2005) and of the individuated—almost asocial—consumer, intoxicated by choice and enamored of ever-newer commodities. And as Schein (2008) has argued for Hmong Americans, for instance, the pursuit of media entrepreneurship is entirely consonant with the retrenchment of social welfare indexical of neoliberal shifts in both the U.S. and Chinese economies.

The model of consolidation—in terms of media ownership, influence, and ideological content—is countered, to a certain extent, by other processes. Witness, for instance, a thickening of media traffic between sites of production within Asia, exemplified by the popularity of Korean soap operas in China and Japan. Moreover, as Annabelle Sreberny (2006) points out, non-Euroamerican national media industries have gained strength in recent decades, with Bollywood as the most striking example. Any analysis of these developments must also take account of the rise in diverse “new media” technologies, some of which might be more accessible across class and spatial divides, and which cannot but facilitate a proliferation of forms of production and consumption. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin have argued that “decentralized ‘small media’ suggests the emergence of a ‘new media era’ that is more fragmented and diverse in its economic and social organization . . . , more characteristic of the expansion of informal markets under neoliberalism and the fluidity of late capitalism than the older forms of mass media” (2002, 3).
One of the commonly attributed features of new media is their potential to create or enable new forms of subjectification as well as linkages and communities across great distances. For instance, in their collection on queer media in Asia, Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue regard interactive media such as Internet bulletin boards, listservs, and chat rooms as having “sparked a Revolution, transforming lives and lifestyles,” and as “the conditions for the emergence of new kinds of connectivity and communities” (2003a, 1–2). As we argue later in this introduction, we build on and depart from this approach by focusing on newer as well as “older” forms of media (including print, television, film, and video) that intensify forms of connectivity that have long been burgeoning within and beyond Asia. We thereby resist the implication that recent communicative forms represent an abrupt watershed of sexual expression.

We aim, then, to push beyond the binarism succinctly summarized by John Sinclair and Stuart Cunningham as follows: “Whereas flows of people often have tended to be from what the world-systems theorists call the ‘periphery,’ or developing world, and towards the ‘centre,’ or metropolitan nations (e.g. Wallerstein, 1991) media flows historically have traveled in the other direction” (2000, 2). Two forms of erasure are risked in this type of formulation. First, emphasis on the transnational mobility of persons can obscure the practices of consumption and imagining undertaken by those who never move. As Wanning Sun puts it, “Transnational imagination develops not only within those who are mobile, flexible and deterritorialized but, perhaps more poignantly, within those who cannot, will not, and have not traveled” (2006, 20). Second, and related, an emphasis on hegemonic media flows imputes cultural stasis to receiving media populations portrayed as waiting impotently to be culturally colonized. Even in instances when media texts are produced in the West they are adapted, appropriated, reconfigured, and indeed rejected as they circulate to other parts of the world.

What we underscore, however, is the critical significance of Asia to transnational traffic in media by positioning it not merely as a site of the reception of Western media but as another set of nodes for production and circulation. Mankekar shows, for instance, that television programs produced in India, ostensibly aimed at “Indian” audiences, travel via satellite to different parts of the world. Dell explores an instance in which an American-made documentary becomes the vehicle by which Indian-made photographs circulate in such locales as New York City. Analyzing the genre of documentary and the polyphony of responses (including her own), she inflects the reception
of the film with contexts ranging from the historical (for instance, colonial and neoimperial narratives of rescue) to the discursive (such as moral panics both within and outside India).

Finally, to employ the language of scale, it is important to highlight that many of the media examined in this volume are sited at both the transnational and the subnational scales, with the nation sometimes becoming a relatively weaker frame for production and reception (see also Appadurai 1996 and Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988). The transmissive promiscuity of media has allowed such “scale jumping” (Smith 1992) to become a commonplace, such that subgroups, minoritized groups, and diasporic groups within nation-spaces might bypass the national scale to participate in transnational media circuits, and sometimes, as Schein has suggested, deploying media texts to imagine cosmopolitanism against the grain of national exclusions (Schein 1999a; see also Sun 2006 and M. M. Yang 1997).

The question of circumventing the nation provokes related debates around the so-called “public sphere” (Habermas 1979). The advent of transnational media in postsocialist states, for instance, is often lauded as a benchmark of “freedom” from state control. This raises questions of whether it is appropriate to conceptualize media as a vehicle for communications autonomous from the state, or whether increasing media conglomeration merely creates a new form of control over the unfettered speech of “the public.” Without attempting to adjudicate definitively between these two positions, we note a multiplicity of debates, stressing that the binaristic notion of an oppositional public always already scripts control—whether state or corporate—as an inexorable context of mediated speech. We want to bring into greater visibility a cacophony of speech forms not necessarily reducible to the question of relative autonomy (see Gitlin 1998).

Social Erotics, Erotic Sociality

Our theorization of erotics critically engages social constructionist and poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, sexuality, and desire. Erotics are thoroughly and irretrievably entangled with the socius, shot through with the poetics and politics of difference, shaped by the imagination, and fueled by fantasies (Bataille 1986; Vance 1991; Weston 1998). Extending beyond sex acts or desires for sex acts, they are often flashpoints for multiplex social tensions (Rubin 1984). Erotics must come into focus through, not despite, their linkages to the social, the economic, the geopolitical, and so on. Situated at the “intersection of the psychic and the structural” (Mankekar, this...
volume), the erotic is frequently enmeshed in, for instance, yearnings for upward mobility, longings for “the homeland,” formulations of nationhood and citizenship, and ruptures of ethnic and racial identity.

Taking the erotic as an object of analysis necessitates being reflexively vigilant about the relationship between epistemology, methodology, and ethics. Drawing on a rich genealogy of feminist and queer scholarship, we reject notions of the erotic as a constant biological substrate that is subsequently shaped by media or, for that matter, by culture (see, for instance, Vance 1991 and Weston 1998, 9). Conceptualizing the erotic in biological terms has had implications for how some scholars have theorized sexuality and “ranked” societies and cultures. It has enabled the evolutionary classification of societies such that “the way that a group handles eroticism becomes a marker of social (dis)organization and evolutionary advance” (Weston 1998, 17, 18). The political consequences of such a paradigm are far reaching, particularly when they converge with racist representations of racial and cultural Others. This can be clearly seen in the discourses surrounding the “Hottentot Venus,” which ascribed evolutionary difference to purported discrepancies in anatomy that, in turn, were translated into representations of hypersexuality (Gilman 1985).

Theoretical frameworks that explore sexuality and erotics in terms of “sameness” or “difference” have tended to either pose sexuality as a “natural universal” or overemphasize alterity and exoticism (Manderson and Jolly 1997, 1). These approaches are ethnocentric in that they raise the question of whose vantage point should be used to adjudge sameness and difference. Theorizing erotics entails acknowledging the heterogeneity of erotic valuations within and across particular cultural and historical contexts. This is exemplified by Zhang’s study (this volume), which shows how the seeking out of clinical care for sexual health and dysfunction is eroticized through a radio advice program, made popular by the mere fact that the explicit discussion of sexual functioning carries a pleasurable transgressive value because it goes against the grain of earlier decades of Maoist silence. Martin Manalansan (this volume) likewise explores an instance of situatedness in which “wayward erotics” emerges in the act of return of Filipino queers to the Philippines: wayward erotics involves “insubordinate or recalcitrant forms of practices . . . forms of erotics that refuse or deflect being anchored to linear, romantic directionality and simplistic filial links to homelands.” Dell’s chapter engages a topic that continues to be taboo even in liberal discussions of sexuality and sexual normativity: the erotics of childhood and children in an Other place, namely, Sonagachi, a red light district in Kolkata.
(formerly Calcutta). As Dell argues, *Born into Brothels* illustrates the complex and contradictory discourses surrounding children of sex workers: as it situates the children in a landscape of erotic excess, the film is also “a plea for a ‘return’ to normative innocence, even while it delivers erotic access” (this volume).

We build on critiques within queer theory of a unilinear trajectory of the “globalization” of queer sexualities from the West to the rest of the world (see also Cohen 1995; Jackson 1997; Martin et al. 2008; Morris 1994; Rofel 2007a; and Tan 1995). In his groundbreaking analysis of globalizing discourses of gay liberation, Manalansan has described how, in the “shadow” of Stonewall, emancipatory narratives of gay liberation tended to privilege Western definitions of same-sex practices and marginalize or cast as premodern or unliberated non-Western modalities of same-sex desire (1997, 486).9 Similarly, Gayatri Gopinath has critiqued assumptions within some strains of queer theory that present “colonial constructions of Asian sexualities as anterior, premodern, and in need of Western political development—constructions that are recirculated by contemporary gay and lesbian transnational politics” (1997, 473–74). With a different approach, but not unlike Sara Friedman’s scrupulous ethnography of disparate film audiences (this volume), Gopinath’s project clears a space for embracing sexualities and erotic desires “at odds” with conventional Euroamerican narratives: her analysis of Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* and Shyam Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy* foregrounds how these texts refuse to “subscribe to the notion that the proper manifestation of same-sex eroticism is within a ‘politics of visibility’ in the public sphere” (1997, 482). She argues that, in a South Asian context, “what constitutes ‘lesbian’ desire may both look and function differently than it does within Euroamerican social and historical formations, and draw from alternative modes of masculinity and femininity” (Gopinath 1997, 482).

**Erotic Contests: Articulations of Race, Nation, Gender, and Sex**

One theme that recurs here is that of contestations around national, racial, and ethnic affiliation, and around normativities and transgressions that associate specific sexualities with certain ethnic, racial, or national formations and exclude others from rubrics of belonging. Some of these practices resonate with older legacies of representing Asia as the site of the sexual exotic. Early explorer, missionary, colonial, and anthropological descriptions sketched Asian sites as abounding in cultures of sexual excess, immorality, perversion, and repression (Bleys 1995; Jolly 1997; Reed 1997). Then, as Ann Stoler has so incisively recounted, post-Orientalist critique gener-
ated a Freudian model of Europe’s relation to the Orient: “A profusion of literary and historical studies have catalogued the wide range of sexual and gendered metaphors in which the feminized colonies, and the women in them, were to be penetrated, raped, silenced, and (dis)possessed” (1997, 32). Later images, perduring into the present, focus on the Asian sex trade, made famous through the Vietnam War and U.S. military bases in Korea, Japan, and the Philippines (Manderson 1997; see also Dell, this volume), and on Asia as sending site for trafficked women in labor, sex work, and marriages (Tolentino 1996), amounting to a troping of Asia as what Lynn Thiesmeyer has called the “West’s comfort women” (1999). These racial regimes of representation have spilled over to diasporic Western and gay Asian contexts, holding constant the image of the Asian as hyperfeminine (whether male or female) and variously hypersexual or hyposexual (D. Eng 1996; Fung 1991; Shimizu 2007). Foregrounding the heterogeneous positionalities of Asians as cultural producers, critics, and desiring subjects revises the imagery of “the colonies as a site for the ‘revenge of the repressed,’ an open terrain for European male ejaculations curtailed in the West” (Stoler 1997, 33), and of Asians as compulsorily heterosexual or erotically restrained, or both.¹⁰ This perspective dovetails with the sexuality studies scholarship now being produced in Asia, as found in the groundbreaking work of Taiwan-based Josephine Ho on transsexuals, pornography, sex workers, and other sexuality rights issues; as published in journals such as Inter-Asia Cultural Studies and Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific; and in the proceedings of the First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies held in Bangkok in July 2005.¹¹

Mindful of the dangers of producing gender-blind analyses of the sexual, our essays take up the fraught relationship between discourses of gender and erotics. On the one hand, the erotic is centrally implicated in the construction of hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. Our contributors analyze how, for instance, Westerners’ imaginaries about Eastern femininities range from the transgressively erotic (Dell) to the titillating (Allison) to the submerged or even disavowed insinuation of erotics (Constable). Meanwhile, cultural nationalisms can be coimplicated with discourses of appropriately gendered sexuality. In India, transnational television centrally participates in the reconfiguration of notions of “Indian” womanhood indexed in part by sexual propriety (Mankekar). Conversely, children in Kolkata who are, allegedly, “born into brothels” promote a voyeuristic erotic othering of their mothers’ excess (Dell).
At the same time that linkages between the politics of desire and the politics of gender need to be foregrounded, sexuality struggles cannot be subsumed entirely under gender politics (here we follow Rubin 1993; Sedgwick 1993; Vance 1984; and others). Relatedly, privileging erotics over the politics of sexuality risks underestimating the very serious concerns associated with sexual “danger” (Vance 1984). For Asia, these loom large, if we think about the practices of coerced military prostitution or “comfort women” historically, as well as the extent of contemporary sexual exploitation both within Asia and transnationally, if we think of the epidemic proportions of HIV and AIDS in some Asian sites and its terrible silencing in others, if we think of restrictions on reproductive control for women, whether in pronatalist or anti-natalist societies, or if we think of the rise in polygynous and concubinage-type partnerships associated with the transnationalization of Asian capital. And certain Asian men are not immune from related dangers such as serious rates of STDS in some sex-work locations and fierce reprisals for same-sex desire.

Yet we wish to remain alert to the risks of colluding with longstanding tropes of feminized Asia as ever sexual quarry and victim (see Harrison 2001). We queer this picture by exploring instead some of the more quirky and indeterminate contours of Asian erotics, acknowledging that they are formed in the crucible of all of the above. To emphasize such a situated erotics, of course, is not to repaint Asians as indiscriminate pleasure-seekers. Indeed, many of the analyses included in this volume, especially those by Constable and Schein, depict women as hedged around with sexual messages that call out desires that they, in turn, refuse.

Rethinking “Asia”

Our insistence on the cultural and historical specificity of erotic desire undergirds our concern with how Asia is produced—both in popular cultural representations of transnational media and in our scholarly analyses. Ongoing discussions within and outside the U.S. academy about the changing constitution of area studies and, in particular, Asian studies form the intellectual context for our interventions. Several scholars have traced the institutionalization of area studies in the United States to a “larger Cold War liberal project for the conceptualization of global as well as local differences” (Rafael 1997, 92). The institutionalization of area studies was embedded in the new imperial vision the United States had of itself as peacekeeper and arbiter of international conflicts: area knowledges were to equip America for
this task. Area studies in the United States have also been linked with efforts to formulate liberal, pluralist conceptions of citizenship in the post–Second World War era, in response to the question of how (elite) U.S. citizens could prepare themselves for their ascendant leadership role in the world.

Certainly, neither Asia nor Asian studies have been singular or static. Extending an important debate on the production of Asia as a region and as an epistemological category over the last two centuries, Prasenjit Duara examines Asia “as a region of our times” by drawing on perspectives in historical sociology and the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991). He points out that Asia, as a region and a product of regionalization, has followed “hegemonic modes of spatial production,” in particular, those of imperial regionalism, anti-imperialist projects of regionalization, post–Second World War conjunctures (including the Cold War), and the circulation of populations (2010, 963). The form and content of Asian studies have varied in different parts of the world. Note, for instance, the heterogeneity of genealogies, political canons, intellectual agendas, and preoccupations of Asian studies in the United States, Europe, Australia, and academic sites across Asia. Indeed, as several Asia-based scholars argue, analyses of the discursive production and deconstruction of Asia have a rich genealogy within specific and diverse intellectual traditions within Asia, and have played a foundational role in the formation of the vibrant field of critical Asian studies. For instance, Sun Ge situates the discursive “unpacking” of Asia within a longer genealogy of Japanese intellectual history and relates it to shifting trajectories of Japanese nationalism at different historical moments (2000). Wang Hui points to “ambiguity and contradictions in the idea of Asia,” asserting: “The idea [of Asia] is at the same time colonialist and anti-colonialist, conservative and revolutionary, nationalist and internationalist, originating in Europe and shaping Europe’s image of itself, closely related to visions of both nation-state and empire, a notion of non-European civilization, and a geographic category established through geopolitical relations” (2007, 27). More recently, Wang Hui has insisted that we bring a comparativist perspective to the project of historicizing Asia. Hui insists that problematizing assumptions about Asia must “reevaluate the notion of Europe” (2010, 986).

We proceed, then, from the premise that Asia is an unstable signifier that, in the words of Yan Hairong and Daniel Vukovich, is mobilized by “multiple social imaginaries and enlisted in the imperialist projects of the United States and Japan, as well as by various anticolonial movements, alliances, and revolutions” (2007, 211). Asia defies romanticization as resistant to capi-
tal or empire: the revival of the Bandung spirit and the resilience of progressive academic and activist networks based on South-South collaborations exist alongside the efflorescence of Asian nation-states that are major hubs for the movement of global capital. As Yan and Vukovich argue, “While we cannot escape rethinking the question of Asia, we also can neither reduce Asia to certain Western historical imaginaries nor invoke an essential, ontologically pure Asia as self-evident, self-sufficient, and self-made” (2007, 212). A conceptualization of Asia as a “mobile, changing collection of spaces that never settle absolutely inside any fixed boundaries” (Ludden 2003, 1069; see also Sun Ge 2000, 5) resonates with our own interests in the (re)production of Asia through the transnational mediation of erotics.

Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly insist that, rather than look for “exotic erotic” practices unique to Asia and the Pacific, we should interrogate erotics in terms of “cross-cultural exchanges in sexualities—exchanges of meanings as well as the erotic liaisons of bodies” (1997, 1). Drawing on the pioneering work of Edward Said (1979), Rani Kabbani (1986), Malek Alloula (1986), and others, on the place of the erotic in representations of racial and cultural Others, we ask how our modes of knowledge production about erotics, the epistemological and theoretical frameworks we deploy, converge with, reinforce, or contest the ways Asia is discursively constituted. As Roger Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo have cautioned, we need to avoid an “identity political” framing, not simply because it “asserts the transhistorical and cross-cultural existence of only certain global identities” but, more importantly, because this “denies the history and historicity . . . of the widely varying ways sexualities have been understood and practiced” (1997, 5). Our interest here lies in exploring how transnational media’s role in constituting erotics implicates the production of Asia as a “field” of popular representation, research, and knowledge production.

Hence we invoke an Asia in medias res, always in production. We conceive of Asia as an assemblage of ideas, histories, and images, the very construction of which is haunted by heterogeneous legacies and memories of empire, and vastly different histories of racialization (compare Said 1979; Lowe 1991; and Morley and Robins 1995 for a similar unpacking of “Europe”). How do these varied, discrepant entanglements with the past shape transnational cultural productions in the current historical moment? How do these discontinuous histories inflect cultural productions by Asians themselves? As we have suggested, despite the enduring power of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial discourses of racialization, cultural difference, and moder-
nity that circulate about and within Asia, neither Asia nor Asians can be reduced to objects of a dominant “Western gaze.” Thus, for instance, in her book *The Hypersexuality of Race*, Celine Parreñas Shimizu analyzes the films *101 Asian Debutantes* and *Good Woman of Bangkok* to explore how Southeast Asian prostitutes use their bodies to speak back “in defiance of representation.” By complicating the agency of these women, Shimizu presents them as not “simply overdetermined by race and economics, but [as] subjects who engage technologies of the visual and the sexual in order to write themselves into the historical record” (2007, 225).

Moreover, even when the West assumes a spectral presence in debates surrounding transnational media (and, more broadly, globalization), we cannot assume the totalizing power or the singularity of the so-called Western gaze. In this volume, we juxtapose media texts about Asia constructed in the West with those constructed within Asia and its diasporas in order to draw out the discursive continuities and discontinuities that cut across them. In several instances—for example, in the case of Hmong producers of video, Indonesian publishers of *gay* and *lesbian* zines, and children in Kolkata wielding loaned cameras—Asian men and women seize the means of representation. While this does not automatically shield them from deploying racialized or Orientalizing forms of representation, it complicates any reductive understanding of Asians as always-already victims of an objectifying Western gaze. And, in the case described by Constable, Filipina and Chinese women involved in correspondence courtship resist what Ara Wilson (1988, 119) called the “rhetorical vulnerability” of catalogue brides, countering their objectifying representations as erotic objects by presenting themselves as complex persons, and in turn rejecting “sterile market analogies and views of themselves as commodities” (Constable, this volume).

**New Media**

The rise of new media technologies pushes us further in rethinking the dynamics by which “Asians” are constructed and negotiated. Asians have occupied highly spectacularized positions in relation to the technologies of new media. Three key figures of representation have been salient—the docile nimble-fingered laborer in computer-assembly sweatshops, the gendered object of orientalist desire as accessed either through virtual courtship or through pornographic representation in cyberspace, and the border-crossing cyborgian geek, with access to special, H-1B visa status in the United States thanks to his extraordinary high-tech proficiencies. A telling contradiction, a doubleness to Asia, persists in these regimes of representation: on
the one hand, Asia appears as mired in the poverty that produces a surfeit of laborers, brides, and sex workers, while on the other hand, Asians—whether as transnational techies or as Asia-based corporations—are seen as garnering disproportionate profits from production of media electronics.

A debate has raged in commentary on the potentialities of digital image-making (Gonzalez 2003) and the Internet (Daniels 2009b; Gonzalez 2009; Turkle 1995). Is it a virtual space where bodied identities such as race and gender are deconstructed and evaded, so fluid as to be insignificant? Or is it a site where, through intense visual and textual productivity, such identities are made hypervisible and, indeed, become a crucial medium of social process in such arenas as gaming and avatars, advertising, music videos, and Internet dating (Nakamura 2002, 2007)? What makes visual identities mean? Indeed, how do visualizations of humans come to signify identities (Hansen 2004)?

Theorizations have not taken up geographic identities to nearly the degree that they have entertained race and gender, but the questions clearly transfer. The geospaces of Asia are increasingly unbordered by the rhizomic movements of digital communications, but at the same time we see an almost viral intensification of the imaging of Asian places that stands to further stabilize the region as the longstanding Other it has characteristically been. Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson (2002) analyze how this process plays out through the posting of Internet commentary about Western sex tourists’ erotic exploits overseas. Lisa Nakamura (2003) shows how idealized orientalist images are held constant in IBM ads, in order to emphasize the way universal computer languages penetrate these otherwise ossified spaces.

But new media communications have not only exacerbated these images through multiplying them in cyberspace. They have also proliferated venues for challenging prevailing tropes. For instance, the activist scholar Kristina Wong has created a mock mail-order bride website designed to “subvert the expectations of a nasty guy in search of petite naked Asian bodies” (Hudson 2007, 4–5) by confronting them with grotesque images and threatening counternarratives offered by Asian women. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu describes several digital porn productions by Asians that “break open the seamless flow of information that presents women’s historical conditions as historical necessities” (2003, 277). On the other side, Western men seeking correspondence marriages, as documented by Constable (this volume), actively seek to defy their own imaging as erotically exploitative through their own online textual production—shared primarily with each other. All these examples suggest roles that new media have played in constructing and com-
plicating “Asia,” underscoring that scholars of Asian studies need to figure media prominently in critical research designs.

**Geopolitical Desires**

Even as media have wrought profound transformations in and beyond Asia, it would be foolhardy to overprivilege media as the exclusive engines of erotic encounter and change. Sexual interaction, as Stoler (1991) has most persuasively argued, was transforming Asia from the earliest moments of colonialism, and certainly can be argued to have been significantly present in even earlier eras of exploration and trade (Bleys 1995). To be convinced of how deep and wide sexual engagements have been both historically and spatially, one need only recall the musings of women from highland New Guinea about gold prospectors they slept with in the classic documentary *First Contact* (Connolly and Anderson 1982) or the accounts of Trobrianders on the undesirability of the missionary position, described in Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Sexual Life of Savages* (1929). But a model of contact, of erotic billiard balls knocking up against one another, misses the point. Echoing Vincanne Adams and Stacey Pigg, we insist on moving “beyond this tendency to let ‘cultural difference’ formulate theory; rather, we focus on how sexualities are constituted in and through projects that blur the boundaries between cultures, norms and moralities” (2005, 7).

Beyond the much-touted European colonial projects, other intra-Asian engagements, such as Japanese imperialism and the institution of comfort women (Tanaka 2002), have likewise shifted sex from being bounded by locality to being constituted out of cross-national interchanges. Transnational media can be seen as in some ways extending these interchanges, as producing an intensification of mobile messages, images, notions around sex, rather than bodies in contact per sé. Media facilitate the pace of mobility of erotics around the globe. And media are sometimes agents for bringing bodies into contact. The Internet as a dating or marriage vehicle is, of course, the best example of this, but there are other examples, such as Schein’s study of Hmong media production practices that precipitate sexual encounters (this volume). Drawing on and extending a growing literature on the globalization and racialization of sexuality, developed mostly in queer studies (Altman 2001; Cruz-Malave and Manalansan 2002; D. L. Eng 2001; Harper et al. 1997; Manalansan 2003; Nagel 2003; Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999), we systematically demonstrate the heterogeneous ways that transnational media enable and, at times, accelerate these processes.
Bodies of Longing

Fantasy

Tracing the work of media in the production and regulation of erotics requires that we also take seriously the realm of fantasy: as Slavoj Žižek points out, “Through fantasy, we learn ‘how to desire.’” Fantasies provide the “coordinates” of our desire, and also constitute—rather than fulfill or satisfy—desire (1989, 118). At the same time, it is important to affirm that fantasies, including erotic fantasies, are hardly unmoored from social and historic context. Foregrounding the social and political consequenciality of fantasy, Allison reminds us that “fantasy is not mere or random escapist fantasy, as the term is often used colloquially, but rather is constituted in relationship to the specific milieus in which people live and to which they refer even when constructing imaginary worlds” (1996, 124–25). Indeed, beyond existing milieus, some have argued that mediated erotic fantasy even stands to be a destabilizing social force (Hunt 1993; Arvidsson 2007).

But what are the kinds of fantasies generated by transnational media? Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis assert that “fantasy . . . is not the object of desire, but its setting” (1986, 26). This applies as much to media produced on a smaller scale, such as videos and zines, as it does to electronic media like the Internet and Western-produced mass media, such as Hollywood cinema. How are these potentialities for fantasy fashioned and refashioned as they travel across diverse mediascapes and geographies of the imagination? And how can we tease apart the intentionalities of media producers, who may be operating with instrumental motives for the production of fantasy (marketing, morality, political-ideological discipline, health education, etc.), from the unruly and capricious phenomena of reception where all manner of unorthodox and unscripted responses may generate fantasy material? Fantasy, then, might be at once informed by but also disjunctive with top-down media messages. It is a space where dominant codes may be resignified, either playfully or oppositionally.

The extent to which our fantasies are both suffused with and generated by media problematizes our understanding of the putative boundaries between self and society, inside and outside. Boellstorff warns against “implicit theories of agency that underlie many descriptions of mass-mediated erotics, desire, and pleasure in Asia (and elsewhere). Again and again, a presocial erotic, desiring, pleasuring self is granted an assumed ontological priority: flipping open the newspaper, surfing the Web, and then secondarily entering into a transformative relationship with the mass media in ques-
tion” (2003b, 23). In contrast, our conceptualizations of media, erotics, and subjectivity are mutually implicated. For instance, we are interested in how erotics spawn culturally—and historically—specific modalities of personhood and subjection and thereby problematize assumptions of an “individuated subject of sexuality” (Manderson and Jolly 1997, 24). At the same time, attending to different modalities of subjectivity informs how we conceive of mediated erotics.

If, as noted earlier, our fantasies are “specific to the milieus” in which we imagine our worlds, so too are the forms taken by erotic desire. The media we investigate in this volume enjoin us to suspend any bounded or determinate notion of what comprises erotic texts. Does erotic involvement in media recognize borders between sexual and nonsexual representation? Ethnographic engagement tells us again and again that only by apprehending episodic and indeterminate meanings at discrete moments of reception can we even begin to recognize patterns, however contingent, in the production of erotics. Sara Friedman’s chapter in this volume deftly suggests homosocial as well as lesbian fantasies of social relations distributed across *Twin Bracelets’* film viewership. Constable examines how the American men and Filipina and Chinese women who enter into relationships through their membership in online networks refuse to subsume the complicated desires surrounding correspondence marriages within erotics and foreground instead the realm of heterosexual domesticity through marriage, as well as other longings, for fidelity, upward mobility, and financial and emotional security, shaping the aspirations and practices of her informants.

**AFFECT, BODY, DESIRE**

The dynamics of the interplay between media and erotics compels a rethinking of concepts such as “structure of feeling” (R. Williams 1974) and “emotion talk” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990) that imply dominant discourses triggering subjective states through structured meanings. Media consumption, in its less logocentric characteristics, its sensory multidimensionality, which often privileges the visual, the aural, and even the haptic (Deleuze 1989; Marks 2000), cannot be reduced to a process of the structuring of emotions. As Brian Massumi suggests, this latter process bestows priority onto the already encoded “ideological master structure” that inscribes, indeed codes, the body in predictable, and legible, fashion. In much media consumption, however, not only does the body become involved, but these moments of what we might call affect efface distinctions between the psychic, the cognitive, and the corporeal. Pornography is, of course, the most
apparent example of this, but, as Linda Williams (1991) has pointed out, other genres, such as the tearjerker and the horror story, likewise necessarily implicate the visceral in complex entanglement with meaning and ideology.

At an even more fundamental level, mediated erotics challenge us to rethink the bodily in delineating what is the erotic. What would it mean to think incorporeal erotics? Andy Miah has suggested this for cybersex which “presents a form of engagement that challenges conventional understandings of sex as a fundamentally bodily engagement with others” (2002, 363). Phone sex and cyber sex, of course, present comparable challenges, as does the solitary consumption of print pornography. By training our lens on media erotics, we broaden this inquiry, asking what forms of interpersonal relations, including sexual and corporeal or not, might be brought into being, perhaps even across great physical distances, through participation in mediated worlds? Fields of corporeality and materiality are necessarily fraught and unclearly demarcated; desires for sexual encounters intertwine with those for commodities or lifestyles (see Wiggins 2000), likewise pushing the limits of what is thought of as corporeal. Desires for medical normalcy, or for freedom from pain, intermingle with erotic knowledges gleaned, in Zhang’s instance (this volume), from a Chinese radio talk show voice. The quality of this voice produces its own sensory effects, effects that are inflected by memory, for the softness of the voice is pleasurable precisely because of how it contrasts with harsh, broadcast voices of the Maoist era.

Following Massumi’s emphasis on movement, on “process before signification or coding” (2003, 7), it becomes urgent, then, to be attentive to the social life of bodied media consumption. It is not only about already individuated subjects in dyadic relation with media texts, nor is it only about how enclosed subjects are internally changed through relating to media. If, as Sara Ahmed (2004, 120) holds, signs accrue affective value as an effect of their movement, it becomes increasingly important to chart the transnational circulation not only of media forms themselves but also of the affective economies in which they participate. How, then, does the intensification of affect through the circulation, the rubbing up against each other, of certain signs implicate social process? Media can be said to move subjects, and in turn to spawn movements of persons across space and into new social relations. The double meaning of “move”—as both emotive and spatial—is crucial here, as Arjun Appadurai pointed out early on in making the connection between the social practice of imagination and decisions about migration (1996; see also Manketak 2008, 153–54). This process is deftly illustrated in Karen Kelsky’s study of the way the iconography of Western men

In the process of the circulation of signs and the creation of nodes of intensified affect, other social effects are inherent. Both relationality (Massumi) and borders (Ahmed) are produced in these mobilities. By relationality, Massumi connotes a kind of radical openness, a potentiality for something new to emerge through interactions: “Relationality is the potential for singular effects of qualitative change to occur in excess over or as a supplement to objective interactions” (2003, 225). With the circulation of signs in media mobilities, there persists the possibility for unpredictable instances of coming-together: it is not that signs impose their uniform script everywhere they travel, but rather that each moment of reception, in its sensory and affective density, contains the possibility of new meanings and movements. One of the potential outcomes, in Ahmed’s formulation, is the alignment of subjects with collectivities and the concomitant production of social boundaries (2004, 117). Media and their consumption are crucial not only in reinforcing communities but also in producing unanticipated forms of belonging. Extending these lines of thought, it becomes clear how mediated erotics, particularly with its intense involvement of the body, might generate desiring subjects in relation to new objects of desire.

**Erotic Knowledges: Epistemologies, Methods, and Ethics**

Our contributors proceed from diverse epistemological frameworks in their theorization of media erotics. Indeed, we posit that studying erotics and transnational media calls for a creative formulation of transdisciplinary frameworks in synergistic articulation with anthropological ethnography. Just as there is no universal definition of erotics, there is no set or singular “method” of study. Our methodological choices are shaped by the objects and subjects of our enquiry and not by disciplinary training or affiliation. Hence, we reflexively stretch and bend “classic” ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing in conjunction with textual and discursive readings.\(^\text{21}\)

Our contributors sometimes talk to informants about media and sex, and at other times variously watch and listen alongside and over shoulders (Geertz 1973a, 452), participate in mediated communications, engage texts themselves through interpreting them and through charting their conversations with other texts, document the production process, follow texts to different sites of consumption, and follow media producers and consumers
in their own peregrinations. Many of these followings might be described as what Schein (2002, 231) has called “itinerant ethnography,” a method that is “in spirit siteless,” focusing on transient, episodic aggregations of people and on constant mobilities of persons and media products.

Our intention in this volume is both to investigate transnational media and, as we noted earlier, to construct a transnational analytics; hence, instead of formulating a comparative approach based on the compilation of diverse instantiations of erotics, we explore the transnational connections undergirding the mediation of erotics in Asia and beyond.\textsuperscript{22} What are some of the ways this transnational analytics can be constructed? One strategy would be to borrow from George Marcus’s (1998) suggestions to conduct multisited fieldwork and to “follow the thing”—or, as in our case, to follow particular media as they make their way across the world. But there are pitfalls to conceiving of media and culture as ontologically separate or cultures as systemically distinct from each other. Such questions of difference run head on into anxieties about the allegedly homogenizing effects of globalization.

The methodological and epistemological politics inherent in the production of erotic knowledges about cultural Others are fraught, as is evident in Dell’s juxtaposition of the truth claims of a documentary film produced by a Western journalist with those of Durbar, an activist organization that has long struggled for the rights and empowerment of sex workers in Kolkata, as well as her own voice as activist-scholar. How can she mobilize the alternative vantage point of a local sex-worker organization to counter a Western demonization of Asian prostitutes without in turn reifying activists’ knowledge production as the authentic truth of those still-Other Asians? Manalansan’s analysis of the interpretations of the film \textit{Miguel/Michelle} on the part of viewers in New York and Manila suggests one alternative to the reification of cultural difference risked in “following” a text across different cultures. Rejecting the notion that these interpretive communities are “anchored to place,” Manalansan analyzes the “increasing interconnections and traffic between the two sites in order to dislodge the idea of ‘distinct’ communities” by foregrounding how “people are increasingly ‘in transit’ both in imagination and fantasy and actual physical travel” (this volume). Similarly, Friedman’s analysis of the film \textit{Twin Bracelets} and its reception among interpretive communities in the United States, Taiwan, and China stresses discursive disjunctures in the intelligibility of same-sex erotics that cut across these different sites. Media mobility emerges as key to these ana-
lytical strategies and Dell’s move of putting Durbar’s knowledges in transnational circulation alongside those of the award-winning documentary can be seen as one tactic of such transnational mobility.

QUESTIONS OF TEXTUALITY

Cultural studies perspectives developed at the University of Birmingham have been particularly inspiring to those of us concerned with developing theoretical approaches that embrace the myriad sociocultural implications of popular texts.23 While we do not by any means seek to delineate or define a single or singular “model” of cultural studies, several of our contributors deploy what we might broadly describe as cultural studies approaches to the relationship between textuality and sociality. In this approach, popular culture is conceptualized as the “site” and “stake” of cultural struggles, as “the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (S. Hall 1981, 239). Texts, broadly construed, are intimately imbricated with cultural struggle, the politics of the popular and the public, and the everyday lives of ordinary men and women. With these considerations in mind, we seek to expand the fruitful, albeit tense, interface between anthropology and cultural studies.

At the same time that we decenter an exclusive focus on media texts, we take seriously their materiality—their form, the representational strategies they deploy, their modes of address, and the semiotic and discursive repertoires that they draw upon. Allison, for example, sensitively traces the narrative and rhetorical strategies—the “architectonics of distant intimacy”—deployed in Memoirs of a Geisha that lend it such a powerful aura of authenticity. Similarly, Dell interrogates the effects of visual texts, examining such cinematographic and editing techniques as the use of darkness and light in terms of how they might play on audience imaginaries.

Attending to the transnational mediation of erotics also requires that we take seriously questions of enunciation (Mercer 1991, 181). Our conception of enunciation, again, is not circumscribed by authorial intention. For instance, Allison holds Memoirs of a Geisha in tension with three other texts that also explore the erotic attraction of Japan and the Japanese for Westerners: Pierre Loti’s Madame Chrysanthème (1910), Alessandro Baricco’s novel Silk (1997), and John Treat’s Great Mirrors Shattered (1999). By tracing the continuities and discontinuities across these three texts, Allison situates the “epistemological erotics” of Memoirs in an intertextual field in which genres and temporalities mingle without melding. In this manner, even as she analyzes the authorial intentions implicit in the text’s deployment of rhetorical strategies,
Allison contextualizes the passionate responses of its readers by situating them within larger narrative traditions that have been produced in the West (and, ostensibly, targeted at Western readers) of heterosexual erotic liaisons between Western men and Japanese women. Nor, as we note earlier, are the texts and discourses produced by Asians immune to self-Orientalizing or to the dangers of self-objectification. Examining the politics of enunciation, therefore, consists of analyzing a text’s mode of address as imbricated with the multiple discursive contexts from which it has emerged and of which it is a constitutive part. Contexts, in turn, far from being a solid, unchanging “backdrop” to media texts, are historically contingent and in part media-generated.24

Interrogating the complex and sometimes unpredictable ways viewers/consumers/readers approach particular texts is consistent with what V. N. Voloshinov (1986) has described as the multiaccentuality of signs. We cannot reduce reception to empiricist or positivist simplifications of what a text “really means” to audiences.25 Our contributors present a range of methodological strategies for analyzing the multiple ways transnational texts acquire meaning for their audiences/viewers/consumers. Against an “abstracted notion” of spectatorship, Manalansan examines the embodied character of the reception of Miguel/Michelle, while Judith Farquhar and Zhang insist on folding questions of historical consciousness and temporality into their explorations of the pleasures consumers might derive from health discourses.

**Ethnotextual Reading**

Some of our methodological strategies might fall under the rubric of what Schein has called an “ethnotextual” method (this volume). An ethnotextual approach emerges from the fraught intersections, as contentious as they have been productive, of anthropology and literary and cultural studies. Inverting the originary Geertzian disciplinary position that cultures should be thought of as texts that could be read and interpreted as literatures would be, ethnotextuality asserts that texts—in the case of this volume, media texts—should be encountered as cultures to which a panoply of interpretive and analytical approaches can be applied. Such approaches are already finely honed in the genealogy of ethnographic production that has concerned itself with what are more commonly recognized as cultural practices but, in large part because of the durability of disciplinary turf concerns, have not been authorized as applicable by anthropologists to textual materials, whether visual or verbal. Drawing on crucial insights from the reflexive and dialogic moments
in anthropology, ethnotextuality entails a decided sense of the ethnographer’s involvement in meaning-making and of the necessity of that involvement being one of ongoing engagement, interlocution, even struggle over signification. E. Valentine Daniel has described this move as “the translation of cultural texts into contextured texts” and the replacement of “the quest for ‘epistemological certainties’ with ‘edifying conversations’ between self and Other” (1996, 11). In the most literal operationalization of this, Schein, Friedman, and others orchestrate directed dialogues about particular clips as a mode of media research.

It is far too positivist a conceit to presume that we can extract directly from our informants’ narratives all we need in order to understand the significations of media. Describing her encounter with two men poring over an illustrated sexual disease textbook in a bookstore, Farquhar muses: “Anthropologists are supposed to be able to ask people why they do things. When we do, and when people will talk to us, we tend to privilege the answers we get as if they were the authentic voice of the people. But in this situation, had I asked, even had I known these two men and established some form of (anthropologically fabled) rapport with them, what could they have told me about their reading process?” (this volume). Recognizing this quandary, we seek greater nuance in unpacking the subtlety by which media texts not only make meanings, but incite desires, shape identities, fashion emotions, implant fantasies, and so on. They do this, of course, in part through straightforward signification, and also through affect, the senses, and the unconscious.

Just as it is not sufficient to simply ask audiences what texts mean to them, neither is it as simple as reading subjectivity off of dominant discourses, or even off of much less powered texts, such as some of the media forms we examine here. Such readings represent excesses of textuality. What ethnographers can bring to these approaches, instead, is a finely textured enmeshment that performs readings only in the course of immersive interaction with those other readers about whom we seek to write. It means taking these texts seriously in terms of their multiple and contradictory effects and appealing to our own subjectivities for additional interpretive insight beyond what informants can speak. Ethnotextuality is in part about consuming together; and it is also about taking reading and reception seriously as inchoate practices that cannot necessarily be narrated, that eschew conscious tracking, that involve intense affect, and that implicate visuality and the body. Because these modes of reception cannot always be described self-reflexively by informants, it is incumbent upon the ethnographer to en-
counter texts directly, to let those texts play upon the subjectivity of the ethnographer as well, and to perform critical interpretation on the basis of an ethnographic sensibility in which one’s subjectivity is intricately entangled with those of informants and is inflected by their concerns.

THE UNRESEARCHABLE EROTIC

A related set of methodological issues arise in fashioning research on erotics (and, indeed, on countererotics). In her incisive critique of the “documentary imperative” undergirding the reductively empiricist focus on sexual acts in canonical ethnographies of sexuality, Kath Weston argues that these approaches are preoccupied with gathering data on the sexual behavior of cultural and racial Others without adequately theorizing sexuality (1998, 6–7). Such an approach risks representing cultural and racial Others as evidencing a naturalized and universal sex drive or, alternatively, as manifesting exotic sexual behavior that indexes and reinforces their radical alterity. Abstracting sexual practices from social life (and thus deploying what Weston, drawing on the work of Henrika Kuklick [1997], describes as “the flora-and-fauna approach”) tends to foster “a mistaken impression of social science research on sexuality as an overwhelmingly empirical project. Empirical it has been and must be, but not without an edge that is simultaneously moral, theoretical, political, and analytical” (1998, 11).

Indeed, the forms of erotics that we seek to understand are rarely straightforwardly accessed through interviews and are, for the most part, inimical to direct observation. As ethnographers, we necessarily pay close attention to what our research subjects say and do. Yet we supplement with a non-logocentric approach that relies on more extensive practices of interpretation. For instance, Mankekar describes how her ethnographic practice was inflected by her focus on the relationship between media, the erotic, and the realm of fantasy. Shortly after beginning ethnographic fieldwork on this topic she found that she had to learn to listen to her informants’ “silences, hesitations, and discursive detours” and “go beyond the verbal, the discursive, and the visible.” When she was able to do so, she found “surreptitious commentaries” being made on issues of sexuality and morality in a wide variety of contexts (this volume).

Questions about methods necessarily raise questions about ethics. Weston’s concerns about the risks of the “documentary imperative” in some studies of sexual behaviors and habits foregrounds the dangers of voyeurism entailed not only in how we write about erotics, but also in the means by which we obtain and produce knowledges about erotics. Conventional
social science methods of survey research, interviewing, and participant-observation seem inappropriate and intrusive, if not egregiously offensive, in many of the cultural and social contexts in which we work. Several of our contributors reflect on the fraught ethical and methodological spaces they negotiate in their research. Constable notes how her own position as “observer observed” was brought to a crisis: worries expressed by some members that she might negatively represent their “cross-border” alliances forced her to withdraw from one Internet community. Dell makes clear the stakes when activist work abuts a powerful media text, demanding that the researcher enact an intervention in the form of laying out the consequences of representation and misrepresentation. The issue here is not the field research techniques we can or should use to “get to” our informants’ expressions of erotic desires, fantasies, or yearnings. Instead, our concern is with the epistemological and ethical implications of how we formulate our objects of inquiry and interpretation.

Our contributors deploy a range of epistemological and methodological strategies to delve into the indirect, elusive, and elliptical nature of erotics (Allison 1989). Allison formulates the notion of “epistemological erotics” in her analysis of fantasies incited by distance and infused with an intimate familiarity. In addition to observing the reactions of her interviewees—their visible excitement and, in some cases, obvious arousal—as they speak to her about Memoirs, she reads erotics through the lens of the allure of fantasies generated by being “transported” to another place and time. Other contributors situate erotics in terms of its intersections with a panoply of yearnings: Dell, by exploring the conjuncture of prurient fascination and moral superiority regarding Kolkata’s sex workers; Zhang, by relating erotics to a longing for health and medically defined normality; Boellstorff, by examining how erotic desire articulates with desires for national belonging; and Mankekar, by siting erotics in a larger web of desires engendered by, among other things, yearnings for commodities and for class mobility.

Farquhar’s remarks about the difficulty of interpreting the pleasures our informants derive from popular culture seem particularly apt for erotics. What are the kinds of hermeneutics at work in our efforts to represent (or even intuit) the erotic feelings, aspirations, anxieties, and fantasies of our informants? The larger question we wish to raise here is how our own desires are imbricated in our will to knowledge. Allison’s critique of the co-implication of erotic desire with desire for knowledge in Treat’s Great Mirrors Shattered is particularly thought-provoking. She stresses the embodied
nature—the erotic epistemology and epistemological erotics—of the passionate pursuit of knowledge about (cultural, racial, and social) Others. Extrapolating from this critique, we seek to reflect on how our desires might be coimplicated in the “distant intimacy” produced by ethnographic fieldwork and other forms of cultural analysis, and how these desires might shape the entanglements of selves “with and against an other” (Allison, this volume). We cannot always articulate the pleasures we obtain from our own interactions with popular texts; even less can we articulate the pleasures surrounding our erotic longings and fantasies. Hence, in addition to tracing the discursive proliferation of erotics through the fantasies and yearnings incited by transnational media, we strive also to read these instances of mediation against the grain, to trace their gaps and ellipses—and to strain for, listen to, and, ultimately, respect the stutterings, hesitancies, indirections, and silences surrounding erotics.

Notes
2. See “Richard Gere Kisses Shilpa Shetty—Riots Ensue,” *Jawa Report*, April 17, 2007, http://mypetjawa.mn.nu/archives/. The last two decades have witnessed several other controversies stemming from the erotic recharging of the Indian public sphere. One of the most notorious of these controversies was the protests and violence surrounding the release of the Deepa Mehta film *Fire* in India in 1998. For a range of scholarly analyses of this controversy, see the work of Gopinath (2006), Kapur (2000), and Patel (2004).
4. See also Boellstorff’s analysis of the “crisis of context” in media studies (this volume).
5. See, for instance, Larkin (2000) and Schein (2002); see also Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin (2002, 3).
8. We aim neither to conflate social constructionist and poststructuralist approaches here, nor to stress their similarities more than their differences. Nor do we intend to summarize or synthesize what are voluminous bodies of scholarship. Nevertheless, the scholars whose work has been foundational to our conceptualization of subjectivity,

9. See also Patel’s essay (2004) for an excellent critique of such assumptions.

10. Such images are countered, for instance, by the provocative insights of Kelsky on racialization in the erotic desires of Japanese women for Western men (2001).


12. For two very different studies of the rise of HIV and AIDS in Japan and China, respectively, see Treat (1999) and Hyde (2007). On AIDS, noncommercial sex, and sex work in Thailand, see Lyttleton’s study (2000). For discussions of some of the issues around polygynous and concubinage-type partnerships in relation to health, reproduction, and human rights, see, for instance, essays in the volumes edited by Adams and Pigg (2005) and Hilsdon et al. (2000).


14. Other critical interventions on this topic include those of Barlow (1993 and 2007), Farquhar and Hevia (1993), Miyoshi and Harootunian (2002), and Cummings (2002).

15. By conceiving of Asia in terms of a critical regionalism that draws intellectual sustenance from the resurgence of academic and activist networks within and beyond Asia (see, for instance, Yan and Vukovich 2007, and Spivak 2008), we join forces with colleagues in critical Asian studies forums within Asia and the United States (see, for instance, interventions published in the journals Inter-Asian Cultural Studies and positions: East Asia Cultures Critique). Yan and Vukovich define critical regionalism in terms of “a reorientation of thought that can resist and provide alternatives to neoliberalism and empire within and across Asia and the world” (2007, 222). Similarly, Spivak insists on conceiving of Asia as a problematic that enables the forging of a nonidentitarian critical regionalism (2008).

16. Compare Rafael’s essay (1997) on how area studies knowledges have been perceived as sources for raw material for testing hypotheses and theories.

17. See the work of Biao (2007) and Lee and Wong (2003) for a discussion of these and other imagings of Asians in relation to technology.


19. On the complex relationship between fantasy and “reality” in Freud, see the work of Laplanche and Pontalis (1986).

20. In a useful discussion of haptic visuality, Laura Marks describes how “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. . . . While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. . . . Haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality” (2000, 162–63).

21. Regarding media methods, see E. G. Coleman’s essay (2010) for a review of recent ethnographic forays into newer forms of media. See the work of Ito et al. (2010) for a
much-referenced volume that demonstrates ethnographic research methods for studying new media practitioners.


23. There exist a multiplicity of cultural studies approaches, and doing justice to this heterogeneity is beyond the scope of this introduction. In pointing to this particular approach, our objective is simply to indicate its salience as one of the many genealogies of scholarship that have inspired us.


25. See also Schein’s (1997) analysis of the polysemy of the image of the white woman’s body as it circulates across China.

26. See the work of Modleski (1991) for an eloquent critique of the positivist imperative in social science approaches.

27. See also the work of Ortner (1995), who also foregrounds the embodied nature of the ethnographic enterprise.