Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia
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Since 1975, Hmong highlanders from Laos have been arriving in the West, after the withdrawal of the United States from intervention in the Vietnam War. Those Hmong who became refugees had assisted the CIA in a covert anticommunist effort within Laos. The failure of this effort necessitated political exile, especially for those who had served as guerillas. Minorities in their homelands, they had dwelled on the high mountain slopes, practicing swidden agriculture, speaking the Hmong language, and retaining distinctive styles of dress and a highly elaborated religiocultural system. Through their alliance with the United States, they had hoped, ultimately in vain, to gain a greater measure of political self-determination within Laos. Instead, perhaps 250,000 Hmong now reside in various localities across the United States. Smaller communities are found in France, Australia, Canada, and French Guiana.

It was with haste and regret that Hmong families left their homes, and, even after more than two decades have passed, the longing of many of the middle and elder generations for the Asian, agrarian lifestyles they have lost remains alive. For some Hmong, whose residence in the United States has eventuated in citizenship and a degree of economic security, this longing has taken the form of nostalgia touring—to Laos, Thailand, China, even Vietnam—in search of a sense of connectedness to the lives from which they were so abruptly severed. Hmong still live agrarian lives in villages in all of these countries. Travelers from the Hmong diaspora also seek out coethnic contacts in major cities, such as Bangkok, Vientiane, and Kunming.
Voyages to Asia may involve family visits, tours, business trips, or a combination of these. What is significant here is that, in the case of more than a few men, Asian sojourns have involved sexual trysts, longer-term relationships, or even marriages with homeland Hmong women. Liaisons of varying durations between Hmong men from the West and their coethnic women in Asia have become the micropractices that constitute an increasingly gendered structure of relations with a feminized homeland. Moreover, eroticized structures of feeling have come to characterize both the actual relations and the symbols of Hmong diasporic engagements with home.

My problematic here concerns media practices in and around an eroticized homeland. Dozens of the primarily male Hmong travelers to Asia are involved in the production of videos that constitute diverse representations of the lands they call home. These tapes, shot, edited, and marketed all by Hmong, take their place in the context of a huge Hmong media scene in which hundreds of newspapers, magazines, audio cassettes, CDs, music videos, and videotapes are produced and sold, all within the Hmong market. Video production emerged specifically from the much larger and older music scene, which features Hmong bands around the world, as well as recordings of traditional music on cassettes and CDs, distributed throughout Hmong diasporic communities. Videos are made by a range of amateur and semiprofessional producers, many of whom have established companies with names such as Hmong World Productions, Asia Video Productions, Vang’s International Video Productions, and ST Universal Video. These VHS tapes, and more recently DVDs, are in the Hmong language and are intended exclusively for intraethnic consumption.4 Shrink-wrapped and usually copyrighted, they sell for ten to thirty dollars apiece. Although usually produced for profit, they are not backed by corporate or other advertising interests. Produced almost exclusively in the United States, they are typically marketed at Hmong ethnic festivals, groceries, and video shops, and by mail order domestically and abroad.

Among this large volume of videos are dramas, martial arts thrillers, documentaries on important events, performance or music videos of singing and dancing, historical reconstructions, and Asian feature films dubbed into Hmong. A moderate proportion concern Asian homeland sites. There are tapes that portray Laos, the birthplace of almost all Hmong Americans and the locus of the secret war orchestrated by the CIA, in which Hmong fought as guerillas during the Vietnam War. There are those set in Thailand, where Hmong sojourned in refugee camps before being granted permission to migrate to the West. And there are those that document a mythologized
land of origins in the mountains of southwest China, where filmmakers encounter their ethnic counterparts, the Miao. Several genres regularly appear on the market: narrated travelogues on the order of homemade tourism videos, stories and folktales enacted in “traditional” homeland sites, historical reconstructions and tracings of migration routes, dramatic restagings of war and flight, martial arts action stories, contemporary (melodrama) concerning Asian lives, documents of festivals, pageants, and other events, and an avalanche of music videos. In many cases, the attraction of the tape is precisely in its traversing of untraveled but oh-so-familiar territories—the mountains of China, Vietnam, and Burma.

Subject Formation and Ethnotextual Reading

This chapter is about reading the video texts of Hmong diaspora from Asia to the West, about exploring the ways that videos communicate Hmong migrant subjectivities, but more important, about conceiving of videos and other media as *imbricated* with migrant subjectivities, as contributing to the shaping of certain transnational sensibilities. In this process, which I refer to as transnational subjectification, gender is closely implicated. The gendered structure of transnational relations is not separable from the forms of representation that Hmong consume. With and beyond gender, however, we enter the more elusive domain of erotics—of structures of desire that suffuse Hmong video and other media, potentially inciting longings around the homeland that are sexual or sexualized.

There is a definite relationship between media consumption and erotic practice, but how that relationship works in specific instances remains a subject for careful ethnographic inquiry. What I present here is part of a larger project that includes multisite ethnographic work on the production, distribution, and consumption of Hmong videos in the context of other processes of Hmong transnational cultural production. In the course of research, I interview producers, performers, and scriptwriters about their visions and their particular production practices. I visit stores, festivals, video companies, and other sites where videos are sold, and I shop alongside Hmong customers. I talk to audience members and I watch videos with them in their homes. Sometimes I catalogue entire video collections to get at the range of consumer tastes. I take the videos home as well and watch them through my own eye.

I want to perform here what I have called an ethnotextual approach to the contents of the videos. Figuring diasporic cultural products such as Hmong videos in terms of their transnational effects calls for a practice of close
reading, of situated interpretation. Such reading practices are by necessity imaginative and creatively engaged with the heteroglossia that constitutes video reception. I watch and read the videos from a site of ethnographic entanglement with those whose subject positions allow a more seamless identification with the films. I pursue intertextual interpretations, charting the unspoken dialogues between different video genres and locating them in the wider play of cultural signification that exceeds the video medium. Forms of folklore, textures of festival and costume, and modes of homeland representation all figure in the making of video meanings, as do conversation upon informal conversation about the works and their making.

The terrain of Hmong American cultural politics has become irrevocably intertwined with media texts, as have Hmong erotic subjectivities. Media texts should be seen as embedded in sexual cultures and in turn as constituting and reproducing them. It is not surprising that Hmong homeland nostalgia should be saturated with eroticism, for a disappearing sexual culture constitutes a cherished part of what is ambivalently recalled about the lands called home. Writing about the construction of sexual desires, sexuality theorist David Halperin asserts that “we must train ourselves to recognize conventions of feeling as well as conventions of behavior and to interpret the intricate texture of personal life as an artifact, as the determinate outcome, of a complex and arbitrary constellation of cultural processes” (1993, 426). For migrants engaged in homeland erotics, we could say that the potential for lands distanced through exile to become sites for recuperated passions produces a reconfigured structure of intimacy.

To get at structures of intimacy in the polyvalent domain of media, a domain that promises both multisensory stimulation and narrative closure, I too consume videos. In the course of my acts of viewing—and I am one of a tiny handful of non-Hmong who view these videos at all—my own desiring subjectivity is implicated. My moments of pleasure are cross-cut with voices of critique, sharpening my awareness of the politics of my white, American woman’s eye as it is cast upon these texts and images. Ethnotextual reading, then, means reading alongside and as an interlocutor for Hmong viewers; it connotes an anthropologist’s encounter with culturally embedded materials and regards the particularity of my locations as intertwined with my long-term engagement with Hmong particularities. Just as my standpoint shifts in the course of dialogues and moments of viewing, so too do I speak in varying interpretive registers.
Analyzing Media and Diaspora

Scholars of Southeast Asian refugees have emphasized the emotional tones and social functions of grassroots media in coping with the turbulence of dislocation. The musicologist Adelaida Reyes (1999) found Vietnamese refugee music both in the camps and in the United States to be a “mirror” of the refugee experience, while performance specialist Dwight Conquergood (1988) analyzed the therapeutic functions of “health theater” in Hmong refugee camps. The anthropologist Jeffery MacDonald stressed the role of Iu Mien video exchange in cultural preservation and in the constitution of a “global village” (1997, 242), while the anthropologist Jo Ann Koltyk’s analysis of the consumption of Hmong videos, based on her ethnographic study of a Wisconsin Hmong community, foregrounded the kinds of cultural conversations that occur around watching the videos, as well as the potential for video and other technologies “to create a sense of solidarity and ethnic identity among peoples at a transnational level, irrespective of place or geography” (1998, 129).

Solidarity is indeed a vital artifact of the communications possibilities of such grassroots technologies. Hmong who watch videos of their coethnics in other parts of the world come to think of themselves as ever more unified across distances not only of space but also of dialect, costume style, form of livelihood, and other diacritics of cultural identity. There is great emotional investment in these newly forged unities, but they are unities that are produced only in defiance of the global asymmetries that structure the Hmong diaspora. Dealings between Hmong in the West and Hmong in Asia are highly conditioned by the fact that it is the most far-flung migrants who have the resources and opportunities to travel and to embark on business ventures in order to extract profits from their homelands. Moreover, it is Hmong Americans who are the bearers of camcorders positioning those in Asia as earthbound peasants, objects of pleasure under their gaze, and it is in the leisurely moments of urban lives that Hmong Americans flick on their VCRs to watch the spectacle of rural life and agricultural labor in Asian mountains—many residents of which are too poor to have VCRs themselves.

Such asymmetries are also evident in the actual relations of video production. It is Hmong Americans who are the owners of media technology and producers and directors of the videos. Not only are they the ones traveling to Asia with their camcorders and crews, they are also, in a kind of offshore, “flexible” approach to production (Ong 1997, 62–66), involving many Asian...
Hmong in their enterprises. These involvements take many forms. Hmong American producers may hire their crews and actors on site in Thailand or Laos. They may choose a popular Hmong/Miao singer or dancer in any of these countries and promote them as a phenomenon with special allure for nostalgic Hmong American consumers. Of late, one of the most lucrative ventures in the industry is that of Hmong entrepreneurs buying the rights to feature films out of Hong Kong, Thailand, China, or even India and dubbing them into Hmong language. The mundane work of translation and voice-over may be subcontracted to their coethnics in Asia since labor costs are so much lower. Such relations make emphatically clear that the study of diasporic media in a transnational frame needs to hold the production of solidarity in conceptual tension with its structuring by economic inequality.

**Asian Women and the Semiotics of the (Hmong) Male Gaze**

If the relations of production of Hmong transnational media reveal the disparities entailed in the globally uneven economy, gender only underscores the irreducibility of difference. As I have said, Hmong men from the West are, in recent years, increasingly traveling to Asia in search of sexual liaisons, mistresses, wives, and second wives among their coethnics in the homeland. Their economic power translates directly into the social power to court, bed, and wed very young Hmong women anxious for cash for their families or an opportunity to immigrate for themselves. Resonant with the time-honored East-West practice of picture, catalogue, and mail-order brides, regimes of video representation regularly picture such voiceless and powerless women as objects of a cruising type of gaze that surveys unwitting faces singled out by the framing power of the camera lens.

Such privilege can be seen in the opening to *China Part 3* (1995), a successful video by Su Thao that follows the visit of a delegation of Hmong American men to a festival of their coethnics in China’s southern Yunnan province. Like so many Hmong-made travelogues and documentaries, the video is lavishly ornamented with women—usually in ethnic costume, often portrayed in bashful close-ups of their faces. In the opening sequence, which surveys the content of the film in some thirty brief clips, fully half of the shots are of women. Intercut with such festival scenes as pans of the crowd, bullfighting, pole-climbing, and inaugural ribbon-cutting are shot after shot of women dancing, women walking or riding busses to the festival, women accompanying the Hmong Americans, women watching from the audience, and women as disembodied faces, unknowingly submitted to the intrusion of the zoom, surveyed one by one like commodities in a catalogue. Lest the
subtext of catalogue shopping be too subtle for some viewers, Su Thao is figured frequently in flirtatious conversation with women, and there is a recurrent scene of the ball toss, a traditional courtship game, except now it is between local young women and middle-aged, trench-coated Hmong American men.

That literal cruising is part of the content of such videos is indicated by scenes depicting interrogations as to young women’s clan names—a first consideration of the clan-exogamous Hmong when identifying potential partners. For Hmong anywhere in the world, sharing a surname means that marriage is taboo and even sex is considered revoltingly incestuous. In many of Su Thao’s videos, including China Part 3, we see him in the frame directly asking a girl for her clan affiliation to assess the parameters of her marriageability. In another video about China, the idiom of courtship is made more explicit. Three rural young women are arrayed on a hilltop, colorfully dressed before a backdrop of panoramic scenery. The cameraman asks: “Will you sing a song for me to take back to America to find you a man?” And then: “Are you girls still young and unmarried?”

The girl who is apparently the eldest, but still appearing to be in her mid-teens at most, utters: “Yes, we don’t have ‘it’ yet.”

“Thank you very much,” he replies. The camera hesitates, zooms in on the face of the speaker, then pans to the other two girls. They smile awkwardly and smooth their skirts and aprons self-consciously. The cameraman, now self-appointed matchmaker, narrates: “These are three of our Hmong girls. They are going to sing and I’m going to record a couple songs to take back to our men in America.” He chuckles audibly, then asks one of them the key question: “What clan are you?”

“Zhou clan,” the eldest offers. Then they proceed to sing, not knowing where to cast their eyes. They appear disoriented at the staging of what, in face-to-face courtship, would have been a dialogue but now has been rendered a one-way self-marketing opportunity. Their ambivalence shapes their tentative facial expressions. Again, like catalogue brides, they communicate, but only from a position of what Ara Wilson (1988, 119) has called “rhetorical vulnerability” in which they are commandeered to present themselves in codes not of their own making to audiences not visible to them.

The bulk of Hmong video, then, is embedded within a masculinist discourse, reflected in the eye of the privileged migrant’s camera, a discourse that has affinities with time-honored codes of Orientalist representation of the East (Said 1979). To be sure, the vast majority of Hmong video producers are themselves men, but the predominant gaze upon women in so many
Hmong videos goes beyond such a straightforwardly gendered relationship to conventions around the masculinized filmic gaze in general (Mulvey 1989), and around the overwhelming representation of the East as feminine, sexually exotic, available, and seductive. Like Malek Alloula’s (1986) Algerian women in French colonial postcards, the women pictured in Hmong videos intimate a kind of haremlike erotic excess, both through the images of their countlessness and in the recurrent fetishization of their ornate costume. Moreover, their plurality and the way they are casually browsed by the camera’s surveying eye also promises what the social theorist Anthony Giddens terms an “episodic” form of sexuality, one that “denies the very emotional dependence that fuels it” (1992, 129). In this instance, that emotional dependence might be writ large as a perduing need for homeland connectedness, one that is disavowed precisely through a more discrete, episodic, detached consumption of women.

The trope of the Asian woman as erotic object was renewed and intensified during just that moment that produced the Hmong diaspora, the Vietnam War, and in just that Asian site to which Hmong travel most frequently, Thailand. As the information studies scholar Lynn Thiesmeyer has pointed out, Thailand and Southeast Asia in general have remained sites of a tremendous volume of sexual exploitation of women, whether within Asia or through their export to the West, but this frequency of Western abuse is masked by a dominant discourse in which “Asians actively procure and seduce” while “westerners get seduced” (1999, 83). Thiesmeyer explicates the way Western regimes of representation rob women of their self-representation while staging their complicity in sexual liaisons: “Seduction is a symbology used to implicate the victim in her own abuse by removing her from her own body and voice in the realm of another’s discursive images and text. A major effect of the transference of the actual Asian body into a symbology of seduction is the convenient silencing of the woman herself” (Thiesmeyer 1999, 70).

Homeland Traffic as Text

Beyond the literal documents of available Asian women, another Hmong genre in which the dream of the conquest of homeland women figures centrally is that of the dramatic story in which the pains of transnational disjunction meld with the emotional-erotic fulfillment attained by Hmong American men. This genre has been popularized in a video colloquially referred to as “Dr. Tom.” It was in a Hmong-run beauty salon in Fresno that I first heard of what was then a two-part drama formally titled Yuav Tos Txog.
Hnub Twg (How long until the day I am waiting for?, 1995). In the months after its release, the work was almost universally touted by Hmong Americans as the most popular Hmong video in the U.S. market. Shot in Thailand on the spur of the moment, with a shoestring budget and an improvised script, the blockbuster was the creation of Ga Moua, previously well known as a songwriter in the Hmong music scene and a frequent traveler to Asia.

By Moua’s account, it was a Thai driver who first suggested that he try his hand at video, and that a tale of contemporary significance might hit it big. Spending only $2,000, Moua assembled local relatives and Thai acquaintances to concoct a poignant plot with a believable cast of characters, enacting a scenario that would make Hmong viewers think twice. The story combines time-honored Hmong folklore motifs, including the tragic orphan boy and the exquisite torment of unconsummated love, with newfangled themes of transnational relationships gone wrong.

Set in a refugee camp near the Mekong River, the opening scenes of the original Dr. Tom feature a beautiful young woman, Nkauj Iab (pronounced “Ngao Ia”), who is just falling in love with her childhood friend, Tub Nus (pronounced “Tou Nou”), a foster brother who has been raised in her family since his parents met a terrible death at the hands of a gang of Thai predators as they crossed the Mekong out of Laos. He has grown up to be an exemplary son and brother, his first appearance one in which he offers to help as she prepares a meal. He next appears ambling empty-handed through the camp and discovers her pushing a heavy cart. He valiantly falls in beside her to alleviate the weight of her labor. For a Hmong man to offer his brawn to a young woman in the toil of daily duties is a courtship idiom that recurs both in Hmong custom and in myriad videos. His build is slight, and he is clean and well-groomed in a bold, black and white, plaid long-sleeved shirt and off-white pants. His voice is mature, but not as low as that of an older man who might be less innocent in his intentions. Such a man will appear soon, most often garbed in black, a marked contrast to the whites worn by the younger suitor.

Soon the neophyte lovers leave the cart and stray off the road. Despite the fact that they are living in a refugee camp, they have managed to find some privacy in a classically lovely natural setting. They walk by a river, lean against trees, sit on rocks, all the while exchanging the kind of tentative dialogues that are conventional to Hmong courtship. She queries, “There are a lot of girls in the camp, do you have a friend?” “It’s not time yet; when I do, you’ll be the first to know!” he replies. “You have to tell me or I’ll be angry at you,” she retorts. But he tells her, “Just wait till the time comes.” She feigns a
huff and walks away, requiring him to pursue her to the foot of a giant tree where she keeps her back turned. “Are you mad at me?” he asks, communicating everything by daring to place a hand tentatively on her shoulder. “I’ve had someone in mind for a while now,” he adds, “but I’m poor and I still live with your family. So I can’t tell anyone. And I don’t know if she is going to love me back. Do you have a friend?” She too is coy: “Yes, but I can’t tell you.” He entreats, “C’mon!” She replies, “When you tell me . . .” A touching and familiar Hmong love song in the pop genre is crooned in the background, further evoking the sentimentality of the scene.

Recurrent close-ups of Nkauj Iab’s face allow the viewer to indulge in the sensuality of her beauty while the story line encourages watching her with longing through her new lover’s eyes. She epitomizes desirability in a highly recognizable form of Hmong femininity. She wears her long black tresses flowing down her back, ordered only by a neat hairband that frames her features and reveals the sparkle of fancy earrings. Her eyebrows are plucked and she is made up with glossy lips for the camera. Her face and her figure are rounded and healthy, betraying none of the hunger and physical stress that camp life might have entailed. Her blouse is a red and white striped shirt in Western style, over a turquoise patterned Thai-style sarong—stock dress for
Hmong women once they left Laos. She speaks in a soft and exceptionally high voice, redolent with the vulnerability of youth. She coyly averts her eyes, feigning bashfulness, even as she is the one to initiate a confession of their blossoming emotions. The fusion of restraint with willingness, a courtship trope in and beyond Hmong romantic culture, places her squarely in the role of love object, one honorable enough to be exalted in the script as unassailably sympathetic. Her vulnerability will turn to victimhood at the hands of a man more positioned to exploit his socioeconomic advantage, but for the moment a passionate intimation of reciprocal feelings is staged.

The next scenes emphasize that the brother-turned-boyfriend is diligent and strong. He chops wood with great force and then is shown walking away from their house telling someone he is going to do wage labor for the Thais. He has donned a local-styled broad-brimmed straw hat, indicating that he will be toiling in the harsh sun. This honest physicality sets up the contrast that will mark the entry of his counterpart, Dr. Tom. Tom will be distinguished by technology and leisure, the emblems of his relative wealth. As the boyfriend heads off to his toil, the scene cuts abruptly to an approaching airplane, producing a deafening roar and glinting against the blue sky as it is seen from below. In case the jet itself was not menacing enough, the next scene is of a violent thunder and lightning storm, ominous with gusty wind and torrents of rain. Nkauj Iab watches from her doorstep, sheltered by the overhang of the thatched roof.

The rain ceases and a car is seen approaching, honking brashly. We have not seen Tom yet; he has been ensconced in two forms of transportation that are unavailable to the camp refugees who do everything on foot, exposed to the elements. The car stops and the camera focuses on the unpaved earth outside the passenger door where an ornately patterned cowboy boot descends slowly and touches ground. The camera pans up Tom’s body to reveal quintessential Americana: blue jeans (tucked into the showy boots), a large camcorder draped on the shoulder, a white shirt, a black tailored blazer, an oversized, garish necktie printed with sexy images of Marilyn Monroe, dark shades, and slicked-back hair. He is stocky, clearly not a regular physical laborer, and not particularly handsome. In the life of the Dr. Tom series, the protagonist, played by the director Ga Moua himself, will become known for his silly clothes, contrived to impress ignorant Hmong in Asia, but fully recognizable as utterly lacking in style to bemused Hmong American audiences. The first signal of this syndrome is the overdone cowboy boots together with the ridiculous necktie.
There is a moment of silence, then Tom’s deep, commanding voice is heard, just before his face is finally revealed: “Mmmmm, so this is Thailand. . . . Just as the heart desires.” He glances around with relish at a background of lush plants and mountains, no people or structures in sight. With drama, the heavy drumbeat of a Hmong rock song winds up as Tom begins his pretentious swagger toward the camp. The song pauses for a moment as he meets his sidekick in the script, dubbed “Jerry” in reference to the comic characters Tom and Jerry. Jerry is a local, the comic fool in the story, who promptly performs his subordination by relieving Tom of all his weighty baggage, even the camcorder, leaving Tom, the high-status guest, to walk freely in ungainly American strides while displaying his technological potency by talking on a cellular phone.

Meanwhile the local boyfriend has gotten off work, and as he shops to spend his hard-earned wages on a gift for Nkauj Iab, the music switches back to a gentle folksy Hmong tune. She is at her doorstep sewing demurely, and she greets him with bashful smiles, then mistily opens up the slippers he has given her, but only discreetly after he has gone inside. While she ponders her affection, the camera switches back to Tom, who is videotaping his way...
through the camp to the accompaniment of more Hmong rock music. He convenes a publicity event at the camp primary school, giving away supplies to schoolchildren who stand in long lines and are coached to say “thank you” to Dr. Tom from America.

In the next scene, Tom’s touristy videotaping is arrested by Jerry’s introduction of Nkauj Iab in the marketplace. He is immediately struck by her, and arranges to visit her at her home, commenting to Jerry as she departs, “Oooh, are girls in Thailand pretty!” Later, he approaches her house, now dressed down with sneakers and no tie. He sneaks a shot of her mother embroidering at the doorstep, then asks to see Nkauj Iab. A telling scene ensues while the mother is inside: Tom perches awkwardly on a very low stool, removes his shades to shoot a quick nostalgic clip of the traditional embroidery sitting in its basket, then painstakingly repositions his sunglasses and vainly smooths down his hair. He has become a self-conscious suitor. Nkauj Iab emerges from the house, smiling and friendly, attractively dressed in her fourth sarong outfit of the film. As we have learned in an earlier scene of a dinner conversation, she wants very much to go to America, but she does not yet realize what Tom’s scheme is for her.

**Nostalgia and the Mediated Fantasy of Recovery**

I suggest that videos such as *Dr. Tom* are embedded in the remembering of a sexual culture that still animates Hmong American longings. The visuals in *Dr. Tom* convey a luxuriant sensibility: they ooze with the nuances of a special desire. Nkauj Iab epitomizes a recuperated Hmong femininity, one that has been put under threat by the Americanization of Hmong migrant women. As such it can be read as normative, a critique of Westernization. As the critic Susan Stewart puts it, “Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological. The past it seeks has never existed except as a narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack” (1993, 23). The lure of this girl is the lure of nostalgia mingled with male longing, longing not only for that feminized icon of home, but for an idealized and lost set of sexual mores, the heart-stopping need for one’s object of obsession, and the privilege to make one’s conquest.

The prurient, stalking sensibility evoked earlier, then, does not do justice to the putative tenderness that also enchants the fantasy of homeland liaisons. Such fantasies are anchored to places that are imbued with a particular romantic sensibility. It is as if the passions of bygone youth are conflated with the affection for their lost land. The rituals of courtship, where men
wooed and loved very young and innocently beautiful girls, come to constitute a quintessential facet of culture that is imperiled by flight to the United States.

Whereas diasporic loss is irremediable, then, it is not so in the fantasy world of narrative videos such as *Dr. Tom*, where storybook loves can be found for those with migrant privilege. The cartoonish character of Tom is determined to fulfill his fantasy of dormant romance regardless of the Hmong wife he already has in America. Despite his dubious moral fiber, it is he who is the victor over Tub Nus in winning the hand of Nkauj Iab. He begins negotiations immediately, seducing her family with promises of money and migration opportunities. Mother, grandmother, and eventually father abandon their last promise to Tub Nus’s parents, made when the parents were in the throes of death. Instead of looking out for Tub Nus’s welfare, they come around to the offer of economic comfort implied in making Tom kin. Nkauj Iab resists vociferously, but she has become a pawn in a deal-making that far exceeds her feelings. The video features a traditional wedding in which male elders seal the girl’s fate.

As for Tom, he has procured a few nights of bliss in bed with his new wife, nights only enhanced by her initial reluctance and her eventual surrender to his embrace. His pleasure is short-lived, however, for his economic stature is a fraud. In desperation, he steals away from a street restaurant where he is entertaining Nkauj Iab in style with noodles and bottled soda, to furtively call his wife in America, hoping that she’ll wire him more cash. His request is met with ire, as his wife barks that he has absconded with their family’s welfare money. Tom’s facade has crumbled and he will have to skulk home or face discovery. How can the text avoid restaging the paradigmatic loss of homeland that was so excruciating the first time?

A surprising scene occurs just as Tom bids farewell to his bride, concealing from her that his money has run out. They had consummated their marriage and lived as husband and wife for a brief time. They sit close together on a bench before a lush green background. Tom wants to embrace his bride with one arm, and she does not resist. Indeed, in contrast with her earlier distaste for Tom, Nkauj Iab, in her most purringly submissive voice, suddenly expresses longing for Tom. While he fans her affectionately, she renounces her earlier hesitation and proclaims regret that she had not loved him sooner. She now does not know how she can wait through his impending absence. Tom moves in closer to hold her. The scenario is irresolvably ambiguous. Does Nkauj Iab make this proclamation in calculated antici-
pation of her husband’s departure, as a strategy for ensuring that he comes back for her? Or have her feelings actually undergone such a dramatic shift?

The diverse readings that Hmong audiences have offered of this scene confirm its ambiguity. Several different Hmong recounted to me a basic principle of Hmong sexual culture: such a turnaround—from adamant rejection of the man’s advances to an almost slavish love—can be considered the product of the conjugal bed, of the desires awakened in formerly innocent women when they discover the pleasures of marital sex. “She loves him now because she was a virgin. Now that she’s married him, she has to love him,” said a grandfather in his fifties. A mother of grown daughters, on a visit from Thailand to see in-laws, emphasized pragmatics: “She has no choice: since she has to go with him, she loves him.” Not all women expressed unqualified belief in this tenet, however, but regarded it instead as an ideological position of those who would enjoin women to accept their arranged matrimonial fates: “Hmong say,” a professional Hmong woman in her thirties noted with a tone of cynical dismissiveness, “that once a woman sleeps with a man she will love him for life!”

If we accept the literality of Nkauj Iab’s professed longing, that she has indeed come to care for Tom, and we read it in light of the transnational context in which the relationship is developing, two meanings come into focus. First, Tom has gotten not just any sex, but homeland sex, which, at least at the level of textual representation, can never be reducible to some kind of bodily gratification free of diasporic significations. Nkauj Iab’s reciprocation of Tom’s desire can be seen as metonymic for the successful recovery of the homeland, that impossible object of nostalgia whose actual recovery would be just as incredible as the turnaround in Nkauj Iab’s feelings. It is at this moment of completion that the male migrant sensibility of the text is most strongly manifested. Never simply about sexual adventuring or marital conquest in the homeland, it is about a woman who loves back, for if she doesn’t there is no salve to that persistent and painful sense of loss that haunts refugee stories.

**Seductive Emigration**

There is a second type of reading of Nkauj Iab’s sudden emotional turnaround that concerns a complementary longing to that of Hmong men for reclaiming their women. It is the longing of Nkauj Iab to leave the refugee camp and migrate to America. Tom metaphorizes this object of desire. Despite her existing romantic inclinations in Thailand, from the outset, Nkauj
Iab’s receptiveness to getting to know this interloper at all is based on where he comes from. In this dynamic, Tom has become the seducer, and the effectiveness of his conquest is based not on his provocation of bodily desire but on his proffering of migrant opportunity. Tom’s entire presentation has been geared to convincing Hmong in the camp that he does in fact stand for this possibility. His slick attire, his charitable handouts at the school, his descriptions of his transnational business, and his flashing around of cash all seduce locals into believing in a persona that is much more than any masculine attractiveness. Seduction, writes Baudrillard, is “the body operating by artifice and not by desire” (1999, 134). “Seduction is always more remarkable and more sublime than sex, for it is seduction that we prize above all. . . . Everything is at play in the vertigo of this reversal, this transubstantiation of a sex into signs which is the secret of all seduction” (1999, 134–35).

Tom has won Nkauj Iab through the staging of his wealth, power, and availability. And she now wants him physically as an effect of this fragile edifice that is crumbling underneath him even as he restages it to seal Nkauj Iab’s commitment. “I have to go, but I’ll hurry up and file papers to come and get you,” he promises disingenuously. And then, as if acknowledging that the wait will be interminable, for he has neither the resources nor the marital status to bring her legally to the United States, he adds, “When I’m gone, please be patient.” Part I ends tragically, with Nkauj Iab totally alone in the camp, Tub Nus having been called to go to America, and Nkauj Iab’s parents having moved out to settle in a Thai village. Walking each day to the mail delivery room, she searches in vain for a letter from the chimera Dr. Tom. Bereft but faithful, Nkauj Iab waits and waits.

The manipulation of appearances, exemplified by Tom’s con, is, in fact, one of the aspects of the Dr. Tom script from which audiences derive a great deal of pleasure. Despite the tragic story line, young and old alike say they revel in the humor of Tom’s campy clothes and effete affectations. It is almost a kind of class laughter in which Hmong Americans indulge as they puncture the artifice of his proclamations that he is the “richest Hmong in America,” still single because he “studied so long for the Doctor degree,” with a business that has offices in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, America, and soon Japan. As a narrative, the story of Tom’s duplicity commingles sympathy for duped Hmong in Asia with the enjoyment of the genre of mistaken identity at another.
Moral Ambiguity and Media’s Multivalence

The figure of Tom represents a deeply ambivalent heroic masculinity. The text revels in his prowess at playing a big shot with almost unbridled access to women, but at the same time it heaps derision upon him for his duplicity and his self-seeking ethos. The overt text must affirm this censure or risk being intolerable to the imagining of Hmong global solidarity. Indeed, the more didactic Dr. Tom II reveals the gradual demise of the evil-doing Dr. Tom, as the director, Ga Moua, by his account, adjusted to the demands of audiences who wanted to see justice done. Nkauj Iab’s first love makes it to America and goes to look up “Dr.” Tom, who turns out to be nothing but a janitor in a white American doctor’s office. Meanwhile, Tom deceives his first wife into believing he wants to make a new beginning and she takes him to her uncle for a loan to start a farm. With cash in hand he immediately absconds back to Thailand where he discovers that his homeland wife has learned of his lies, abandoned her marriage to him, and returned to her original boyfriend. Her parents curse him mercilessly.

Foiled, but now desperate for a homeland tryst, Tom tries in vain to impress many other women, all of whom let him know that they are no longer to be duped by men from America. In scene after scene, with mounting absurdity, his slick artifice is punctured. At one point he sits in a café, trying to convince a waitress that he speaks Russian. Not the stereotypical impressionable Hmong girl, she turns out to have studied Russian in school herself and promptly exposes him. Humiliated, he returns home, where he vents his frustration violently on his Hmong American wife. She in turn reports him for domestic abuse, and he ends up, in a dramatic climax, hunted down in his home by white and black cops with a search warrant. He tries in vain to hide in a corner, reduced to pathetic trembling, while his loyal sister tries to conceal his presence. Eventually he is discovered, spread eagled on the floor by the state authorities, then handcuffed and carted off to jail.

Clearly, Dr. Tom works as a pedagogical text, warning Hmong men of the perils of straying into the temptations of homeland relationships and cautioning Hmong women in Asia of the risks of succumbing to a con. It chastises marital infidelity, and portrays Tom as doubly economically exploitative: on the one hand, he makes off with his wife’s meager welfare income, and on the other he flaunts it among refugee poor to coerce a reluctant family into marrying their daughter off to him. At this level, the story could not be more moralizing, and, indeed, Ga Moua espoused this intention when I asked him why he had made these films on what was, at
the time, an unprecedented theme that proved to be highly subversive to Hmong American men. “I wanted them to stop doing it! They should be shamed!” he exclaimed with passion. Moua also told me that his videos had played a role in educating Hmong families in Thailand about the dangers of predatory Hmong American men. Widespread viewing of the video in Thailand and Laos, he asserted, was part of what made Asian Hmong look with a more savvy and suspicious eye on their coethnic visitors from the West.

Hmong American audiences also analyze the film as conveying a useful politico-moral message. Over and over again, when I asked why they thought Dr. Tom was so popular, Hmong viewers answered: “Because it’s real.” Not that that story really took place, they hastened to add, but that that kind of thing happens all the time. It was refreshing to be able to laugh at such a shameless predator, and to symbolically reseal bonds with relatives in Southeast Asia through vicarious sympathy for their exploitation. Deeply concerned, Hmong viewers I spoke with envisioned a social impact for the film. “The movie warns men about what they shouldn’t do when they go to Thailand or Laos,” was an interpretation voiced commonly by women and men. Mixing media into daily life, “Dr. Tom” has become a household word, a trope for masculine misconduct in Asia. “Don’t be a Dr. Tom when you go to Thailand!” has reportedly become a common admonition when Hmong American wives see their husbands off for trips to the East. The message: Any man is potentially a Dr. Tom, but shouldn’t be.

That the message of Dr. Tom continues to retain a doubleness—a suggestive potential combined with a moral reprehension—is an artifact of media’s polysemic character. Never is the didactic voice of the story line capable of completely eclipsing that more subtle incitement. One middle-aged Hmong man formulated this appeal in terms of the power of fantasy: “It’s what many men want to do, but know that they can’t.” But, in actuality, they can, and the travel to Asia for second wives and mistresses is far from dwindling. To the contrary, despite heightened awareness of the problem on both sides of the Pacific, there are indications that the practice is increasing in scope, extending further into Laos and China.10 Dr. Tom could not have made its point more strongly, but it cannot escape its character as a media artifact, its visual and aural viscosity that plays irresistibly on the sensorium. Steven Shaviro describes this process as follows: “Cinema invites me, or forces me, to stay within the orbit of the senses. I am confronted and assaulted by a flux of sensations that I can neither attach to physical presences nor translate into systematized abstractions. I am violently, viscerally affected by this image and this sound, without being able to have recourse to any frame of
reference, any form of transcendental reflection, or any Symbolic order. No longer does a signifying structure anticipate every possible perception; instead, the continual metamorphoses of sensation preempt, slip and slide beneath, and threaten to dislodge all the comforts and stabilities of meaning” (1993, 33). At the level of the senses, then, the cinematic effects of Dr. Tom continue to elude logocentrism, narrative, and conscience. Put another way, Nkauj Iab remains breathtakingly desirable in the frames of the camera regardless of how the story frames the abuse of her person.

In Dr. Tom III, Tom emerges from jail and is told by a friend that his wife has had multiple affairs, thus making his return to Thailand for a third time a more legitimate venture. But Tom is now much detested by people in Thailand. They accuse him of all the crimes of Hmong migrant malehood: “You Hmong Americans are always saying you are the top leader; how do we know who’s really the one?” “You are supposed to come help the Hmong, but you only dally with Bangkok prostitutes.” In one comic scene the vindictive hatred for Tom is sensationally dramatized: Tom’s old friend Jerry hosts him at his home. Jerry goes into the secluded cooking area and makes a throat-cutting gesture to his wife. She emerges, raising a huge butcher knife over the back of Tom’s neck as if readying to kill him. In the nick of time, Jerry intervenes and tells her surreptitiously that he meant for her to kill a chicken for Tom to eat, not to kill Tom himself. Locals also gouge him for money, demanding, for instance, that he pay a fee for the image of the rice fields that serves as backdrop to photos he is taking with friends. Over and over again they ask what he’s going to do for Thailand. Amid Tom’s mounting disgrace, a friend suggests that he go to Laos, and he utters elliptically, “Yes, I must go to Laos for I have not yet found love. The blood in my heart has not yet dried up.”

In Laos, Tom’s artifice is gradually restored. He feigns being a long-lost relative to some. He boasts that if he finds a girl who will marry him he will “put up a water tower and light things up like Las Vegas.” And if he takes her to America she’ll be able to “sit in the house and do nothing but make up her face like a doll.” The girl he courts in the city of Vientiane, however, declines his advances, saying she wants to use her college education to go back to the village and help her people. Perhaps iconizing the dutiful cadre in the now-communist Lao regime, she doesn’t care about being rich.

Finally Tom travels, on more and more primitive types of transportation, to a village remote enough that he can find a girl to wed. This time she is even more traditional, pictured working in the fields, wearing full-blown traditional Hmong highland costume rather than the Thai-style lowland attire.
in which Nkauj Iab had been outfitted. He consummates the marriage by an orchestrated traditional abduction, right from the girl’s doorstep, which her parents acknowledge as legitimate. He brings her to town and sets her up in an apartment, winning her regard by buying her a motorcycle. But he cannot give up his long-standing compulsion and continues womanizing. Short clips show him with five other women in a row—chatting, drinking beer, even helping one put on her makeup. The new wife’s family persuades her to come home and abandon the marriage. She and her brother steal away, taking the motorcycle with them. Tom is once again disgraced. Surrupitiously chasing them through town, he finds a moment when they have left the motorcycle running to go make a quick purchase. Furtively but self-righteously, he rides away on it. But the vehicle is registered to his wife, and Tom is once again in trouble with the law.

Now arrested and jailed in Laos, he calls upon his American wife. Unbeknownst to Tom, the audience has been privy to her having an extended affair with a “Dr. Tony,” a real Hmong doctor whom she met when he treated her for her wounds at the hands of the abusive Tom. Despite the fact that she looks older than Tom, wears ill-fitting clothes over her middle-aged figure, and has deep bags under her eyes from a life of discontent, other suitors are also knocking on her door. When she hears Tom’s pleas to revive their relationship, however, she abruptly tells the latest suitor that “it’s better to stick with the one you have.” Dutifully, she bails Tom out. He comes home to Fresno and sheepishly makes a repentant speech: “Honey [in English], if you’re thinking like I am, let’s put the past behind us and reconcile. I’ll tell my brothers and sisters; you go and tell your family. We can have a normal life and our children can have a mother and father. I promise you that from now on I will be your beloved husband and not go to Laos or Thailand ever again.” With these proclamations, they are reunited, and, in the closing scene, are pictured walking arm in arm at the Hmong New Year festival in Fresno, she in full traditional costume, smiling into each other’s eyes as if nothing had ever happened.

**Remembering Cultures of Courtship and Marriage**

One of the things that *Dr. Tom III* does more than the two preceding videos is condense the issues of clashing marriage and sexual mores produced in the Hmong diaspora. The video more deeply explores ongoing struggles around particular conventions of Hmong marital culture—marriage by abduction, polygyny, and adultery—than the previous two. Indeed, the sexual
conduct emblematized by Tom remains of contested moral standing for Hmong immigrants. That Tom procures his Lao bride by ritual kidnapping is a romantic recuperation of the custom whereby Hmong suitors could ambush their chosen partners, take them home, deflower them, and thereby secure consent from their parents to wed. Abduction marriage has been extremely controversial when practiced in the United States and has resulted in court cases around charges of statutory rape. But the cases have been deeply debated, since the possibility exists that a young woman may agentively deploy abduction as a way of garnering reluctant parents’ consent to a marriage while saving face in terms of her virtue, face that would be lost were she to have openly eloped. Yet abduction has also gone horribly awry in the United States, where sensationalized stories of rapes of kidnapped young Hmong women by Hmong gangs have haunted the press coverage of Hmong immigration. Dr. Tom III offers the audience a more pristine staging of remembered abduction marriage, unclouded by the conflicting legal codes that have made all such dealings unbearably fraught as normalization within the United States proceeds apace.

Likewise, that matrimony remains Tom’s objective, despite his being already married at home, opens up the issue of the moral standing of polygyny. Deeply disciplined by laws in the West that allow serial monogamy and permit only one wife, and by Christian censure against adultery, most Hmong have embraced such strictures in practice, all the while being aware of the countervailing tendencies within Hmong marital mores. A long-standing, highly legitimate institution of polygyny for Hmong men of privilege in Laos meant that a significant number of men, because of INS regulations, had had to divorce one or more wives in order to enter the United States. While monogamy is now the norm and ardently supported by most Hmong in the West, the memory of Laos as a place where polygyny was permitted, even prestigious, is still alive, the stuff of fantasy for some, of critique for others, and of recuperative practice for still others. Maintaining a second wife in Asia while the first resides in the West is a means to circumvent the moral-legal strictures not only of the United States but also of Asian countries.

For many, however, homeland erotics is not about the recuperation of polygyny but much more about short-term passionate trysts, or about the setting up of mistresses. That by Dr. Tom III, Tom’s wife in the United States has also ventured into an adulterous relationship routinizes the practice as a tendency that marriages cannot avoid. One Hmong man, trained in U.S. law and attempting a cultural translation of Hmong marriage customs,
writes of the moral ambiguity around such moments of indulgence: “Adultery is thought to be the result of temptation and uncontrollable impulse. . . . Rationalization of this theory rests on the simple fact that God created men and women to be with one another. It is essential that men have feeling toward women in order that one may have a desire for the other. . . . The burden of proof is on the petitioner to show that adultery committed by the other spouse exceeded a tolerable threshold” (Thao 1986, 83). By offering this quote, I am suggesting not that legitimate extramarital sex is an essential part of Hmong culture, but rather that the (not uncontested) discourse defending it is being actively produced as one characterization of Hmong culture. This is a discourse that creates a moral space for which Asia then serves as the physical location, particularly for men. The discourse rests on a long-standing canonization of gender asymmetry in moral strictures, as reiterated in such anthropological statements as the following about Hmong living in Thailand: “Adultery can only take place where a married woman is involved, since polygyny and pre-marital sex are permissible. This means, in practice, that only women can commit adultery” (Tapp 1989, 26).

That the Dr. Tom series might serve as a vehicle for an open-ended exploration of shifting, transnationalized marriage mores is disavowed by the closing scene, in which protagonist and first wife are reconciled. Once again, Tom is readable in at least two ways. On the one hand, he appears to have learned his lesson, had his sense of monogamous marital responsibility in his country of domicile reinforced, and been chastened by his geographic and emotional loss of his loves in Asia. But on the other hand, in the course of his adventures, if only ephemerally, he has managed to have it all, indulged in all the myriad practices called up in romantic nostalgia: the beauty of the homeland, heightened economic stature, courtship, love of a young woman, polygyny, abduction marriage, and so on. That Tom’s desire could have been reciprocated by the lovely Nkauij Iab serves to mediate the moral criticism directed at him at one level of the text.

Women’s Mirth and the Problem of Audience

Dr. Tom’s complexity of meanings reverberates through its reception. In discussing Dr. Tom III, the director Ga Moua recounts that he designed the ending that he did because people were too depressed by the first two videos. “I wanted to make the audiences happy,” he explained, aware that the finale is of dubious credibility. But his efforts were not altogether convincing, since the didactic message could not override the actual account of what Tom had
gotten away with. Women who viewed the film repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the story line: “I would never have taken a guy back after he did that,” they protested.

Women, in fact, are by many Hmong estimates the majority audience for the *Dr. Tom* series and other such narrative films about Asian relationships. There are several reasons for this. First, women, especially middle-aged and elderly women, are more likely to be without work, with more time to stay home, attuned to a video player. Second, these generations of women are more likely to lack English skills and hence appreciate the comforts of viewing media in their native language. Third, as many Hmong have put it, “Women like love stories; men like war stories and martial arts.” Women in their twenties and younger, by contrast, will usually disavow any knowledge of such parochial forms of media, although they may have caught glimpses of *Dr. Tom* or other videos in their elders’ living rooms. They favor mainstream television and Hollywood movies, but sometimes aver that Hmong movies are good resources for keeping up their Hmong language skills.

The enjoyment that women derive from watching Tom is multivalent and highly divergent by generation. What kind of pleasures might women derive from consuming such videos again and again? What they describe most often is the pleasure of laughing at Tom, his horrible wardrobe, his buffoonery. It is a kind of gendered laughter, a laughter of inversion, of the type described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1968), Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986), and Achille Mbembe (1992), in which the banality of those in power becomes an object of fascinating mirth for the less powerful. Moreover, the video series portrays Tom’s masculine power as fragile, threatened, and ultimately untenable, premised as it is on his web of lies and falsities.

In another film on a related theme, *Niam a kaj* (roughly translated Mail-order bride), produced by Su Thao, but authored and codirected by Lee Xiong (one of the very few Hmong women in media production), a form of resistance on the part of women to men’s abuse of their privilege—especially their adulterous and polygynous privilege—is explicitly dramatized. A young woman in Thailand is married off by arrangement between her own and her groom’s parents to a Hmong man in the United States. The groom is unwilling to marry, since he is in love with a Hmong American woman, but is reluctant to openly defy his parents. The girl arrives, alone and without a word of English, to a torrent of abusive neglect, from the moment that her husband fails to meet her at the airport to the hunger she endures trapped in an apartment with neither groceries nor the cultural abilities to go buy them
herself. She suffers a dangerous fever, unattended, while he is out frolicking with his girlfriend. Luckily, an older woman, a friend of her parents in Thailand, has taken it upon herself to secretly watch out for her. When the bride runs away in desperation, it is this woman who locates her. Together with the spurned wife of yet another man who is in love with the fickle, temptress girlfriend, they eventually form a tacit sisterhood. The three women then conspire to humiliate the male culprits publically at a dance party and to make the point that they are not to be trifled with in the future. As the film closes, they emerge victorious and vindicated.

With *Niam a kaj*, viewing video becomes a vehicle for direct gender critique by Hmong American women. Yet, the lure of the melodrama, the poignancy of tragedy, and the sensual pleasure of viewing nostalgic homeland scenes in films such as *Dr. Tom* cannot be ignored in this account of women’s consumption. Women, too, remember the lost courtships of their youth and are subject to the visceral incitements of Nkauj Iab’s beauty and to the titillations of unconfessed love.

As with the romance readers described by the cultural studies critic Jan-ice Radway, women simultaneously consumed these texts both for “emotional gratification” and out of “dissatisfaction, longing and protest” (1984, 212, 214). Both the more feminist pleasures and the erotics of media viewing need to be situated together in complex and flickering subjectivities, with neither privileged as a dominant structure of feeling that would eclipse other sensibilities. As Purnima Mankekar, describing Indian women’s television consumption, put it: “Viewers’ semiotic skills were shaped by their positions along multiple axes of power. I posit that not only are texts polysemic, but subjectivities are multifarious as well. Since the position of the subject is an unstable, temporary one rather than a static sociological ascription, she is located in an interdiscursive space” (1999, 17).

Despite her victimized fate, the character of Nkauj Iab is not portrayed as entirely lacking in subjectivity, agency, or sexuality. Nkauj Iab, it turns out in one surprising scene, is not simply a sex object without her own desire, and she is far from being passively virginal. Indeed, she is barely a virgin by the time Tom marries her. In a scene just before she is wed to Dr. Tom, she seeks out her boyfriend alone in his room. They lament their tragic fate, but he, ever filial, assures her that it is the right thing to do for the good of her family. She is not satisfied with this virtuous resolve and proposes that they run away together. Then, in a remarkable assertion of female sexual agency, she rises to undress, beginning to remove her jacket while proclaiming that if they are to part she wants first to give him “that which is most precious to
“her,” a euphemism for her virginity. When her ever-sacrificing lover refuses her advance, protesting that it will only make them miss each other more in the future, she runs crying from the room, accusing him of not loving her. For the homeland beauty, then, a deficit of social power does not necessarily imply sexual passivity or asexuality.

Hmong women with whom I have discussed this scene find it implausible in the extreme. They are astounded that an unmarried woman should be pictured risking her social standing by initiating sex. And they are cynically amused that the boyfriend should not seize on this irresistible opportunity. But here we arrive at another feature of the film that might make it compellingly complex to women. The video offers not only the reprehensible Dr. Tom as a male protagonist. It also sketches an ideal lover in the figure of Tub Nus, who not surprisingly happens to be an orphan—a stock heroic character of traditional Hmong folklore, and a regular figure in other Hmong videos—who always occupies the spot of the sympathetic protagonist. Indeed, the back cover of the video case places close-ups, first of Tub Nus on the left, with Tom appearing in a shot of equivalent size, at his right. Tub Nus is sensitive and considerate; he cares passionately, but is so moral that he will never take advantage of Nkauj Iab, even if she offers herself. He has restraint, and is willing to sacrifice for family obligation. He is loyal and hardworking.

That there are two forms of masculinity, ambivalently presented in the narrative of Dr. Tom, speaks again to the video’s multivalence. Although Tom gets it all, he also receives extreme social censure both within the text and in its metacommentary on sexual ethics. Meanwhile, the tender crafting of the boyfriend holds out for another version of manhood, one full of heart and upright in society. And lest this image of more appropriate manhood be irrevocably and exclusively associated with the homeland past, it should be noted that by the end of the first part, Tub Nus has migrated to America. Hmong women viewers have not expressed direct pleasure in watching Tub Nus as an attractive filmic object, but the presence of a rival form of masculinity, as presented in his character, opens up a hopeful domain for contestation over how Hmong men should conduct themselves under new transnational conditions and at differing locations in the globalizing Hmong social structure. For Hmong women in the West, Dr. Tom presents not only an admonition but also a vehicle for ongoing vigilance—through repeat viewing and through the social life of the film—about how Hmong men should and do behave.
Conclusions

In a certain sense, one of the things this chapter has strived for is an interruption of any unitary sense of the generic “refugee.” Hmong American men and women have distinct structures of desire for home. While men have been in the position to quest for home through actually returning and pursuing homeland liaisons (although it is only the minority that actually do it), women have been positioned as purveying moral censure for such practices. Hmong women are also returnees to Asia—as kin, as travelers, and as businesspeople—but they have not been located in the dynamics of erotic interchanges in which men are always implicated regardless of whether or not they act upon them. At the transnational scale, the gender binary has taken on a new valence as homeland becomes the quested-after feminine and sex becomes something that can be longed for from far away. 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. As the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli and the historian of sexuality George Chauncey, commenting on globalization and sexuality studies, have noted, this “reconfiguration of the intimate and the proximate poses a set of interesting problems to theories of sexuality” (1999, 443).

In such processes of reconfiguration, one in which spatiocultural difference always inflects moments of intimacy, one key agent is media. The imbrication of media with transnationalism and diasporic subjectivity means at least two things: first, in the consumption of media, people may develop social imaginaries and senses of community and identity that are supra-local—even when they are not mobile themselves. This is a process that has been abundantly described by anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai (1996), Lila Abu-Lughod (1995), Purnima Mankekar (1999), and Mayfair Yang (1997). Second, and conversely, media production and circulation can itself generate certain forms of transnational mobility and new types of transnational relations. In this case, I have ventured to suggest that, through the process of erotic subjectification, the incitements of homeland videos might foment desires for actual returns in pursuit of erotic encounters.

Media, then, are never only about meanings harbored within texts: media’s webs of significance are immanent in myriad social effects, in relations of production and reception as well. The media studies scholar Hamid Naficy has written eloquently of what he calls “independent transnational film” produced by immigrants making texts of their exilic lives: “By linking genre,
authorship, and transnational positioning, the independent transnational genre allows films to be read and reread not only as individual texts produced by authorial vision and generic conventions, but also as sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and translational struggles over meanings and identities” (1996, 121). Precisely because of the polysemous character of media, and the palimpsestical nature of diasporic productions, we must bring complex, ethnotextual readings to them. Methodologically this involves engagement with producers and audience members who occupy diverse subject positions and who receive the contents of media from divergent viewing perspectives. It means attending to the dialogues between audiences and producers as members of a community. It demands interpretive practices of intertextuality, a sensitivity to the way citations are made between texts, and to other cultural fragments such as folklore, as well as to the ways that texts speak to each other as part of the public culture of diasporic community. Finally it means imagining that such media as Hmong homeland videos might be plural in meanings, containing not only didacticism and pedagogy, but also incitement and eroticism, that they engage the senses as well as moral sensibilities, that they themselves effect seductions as well as enlightenments.

Notes


3. For other investigations of diasporic revisits, see the work of Louie (2004), on Han Chinese, and Tapp (2000b), on Hmong returnees, both to China.

4. Since this study was undertaken, media modalities have proliferated, and the DVD format has, for the most part, displaced VHS. New media formats are increasingly interfacing with the feature-length films with which the industry began. It is common, for instance, for younger filmmakers to create shorts and put them up on YouTube. As well, more filmmakers are experimenting with graphics and animation. There is also a burgeoning younger filmmakers’ community that networks through Facebook groups and holds mini film festivals. Through these modalities, younger filmmakers circulate trailers, previews, and other promotional material, as well as announce casting calls,
location requests, and other technical topics. Within these communities, there has been much discussion of the threat to the Hmong film genre posed by the advent of digital modes that allow rampant proliferation and diminish sales in favor of piracy, such that producers are becoming concerned that there will be no sustainable economic future for Hmong movies.

5. The term “Miao” has a long history of various usages to denote non-Han peoples in China. In the Maoist era, the term was stabilized to refer officially to a large umbrella category, the fifth largest minority in China, within which researchers included several subgroups, including the people that call themselves “Hmong.” For the purposes of this chapter, “Miao” appears when I refer to Hmong coethnics in China. Although readily adopted by many in China, the term remains highly contested outside the mainland. For more detailed discussion of the politics of ethnonyms, see Schein (2000b, xi–xiv, 35–67).

6. This research, which will culminate in a book, *Rewind to Home: Hmong Media and Gendered Diaspora*, effectively spans almost three decades, since I began working with Hmong refugees in Providence, R.I., in 1979. Primarily in the years since 1995, I have attended events and conducted interviews and participant observation during short-term visits to multiple U.S. cities, including Fresno, Calif.; Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.; Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; Wausau and Milwaukee, Wisc.; Providence, R.I.; and Detroit. I am especially grateful to the Rutgers Research Council for financial support of this research, as well as to the many Hmong in all these cities who have lent me their time. For more on the scope and politics of interchanges between Asia and U.S. Hmong/Miao, see Schein (1998, 2000a). For a theorization of homeland erotics, see Schein (1999b). An overview of Hmong diasporic media practices can be found in Schein (2002).

7. Since the initial writing of this chapter, access to video and DVD technologies has increased a great deal in the Asian sites of Hmong origin. It will require further research to discern audience reception on the part of those who are also represented in these videos.

8. All translations are a result of collaborations with Hmong native speakers. For translation assistance, I would especially like to thank Nouzong Ly, Ly Chong Thong Jalao, Doualy Thao, Yuepheng Xiong, KaYing Yang, Long Yang, Yang Teng, Ga Moua, and Doua Thor.

9. I purchased the video and each sequel as they came out, widely distributed through ethnic groceries and festivals, and by the director’s mail order business. I have watched them dozens of times and in multiple contexts, with Hmong men and women of all ages, in Hmong communities in California, the Midwest, and Philadelphia, and in my own living room. I have also watched many parts with the director Ga Moua. In many instances, watching the videos together was also accompanied by extended group and individual discussions of key elements of the story and images.

10. These indications include increasingly widespread commentary on the part of Hmong Americans about this phenomenon, commentary that not only critiques but also normalizes the practice; my own qualitative observations in China and the United
States of the frequency of such interactions; and the growing mobilization and even outright rage of those in Southeast Asia who see these liaisons in increasingly structural terms. For more on the standpoint of Hmong in Southeast Asia, see the unblinking documentary *Death in Thailand* (2002), shot, directed, and edited by Hmong American men.

11. For more on abduction and other forms of marriage practice that have been controversial in the American legal system, see the work of Donnelly (1994, 113–44), Goldstein (1986), Koptiuch (1996), Scott (1988), and Tapp (1989, 189–90).


13. At the present revision in 2012, however, there are increasing stories of Hmong American women returning to Southeast Asia for romantic relationships.

**Videography**

*China, Part 3*. Su Thao. ST Universal Video, 1995. VHS.


*Niam a kaj* [Bride unseen]. Su Thao. ST Universal Video, 1998. VHS.

*Yuav tos txog hnub twg* [How long until the day I am waiting for?]. Ga Moua. Ntsa Iab, 1995. VHS.

*Yuav tos txog hnub twg* [How long until the day I am waiting for?]: *Dr. Tom II*. Ga Moua. Ntsa Iab, 1997. VHS.

*Yuav tos txog hnub twg* [How long until the day I am waiting for?]: *Dr. Tom III*. Ga Moua. Ntsa Iab, 1999. VHS.