In the brief space of this essay, I want to stage three relationships and delve into their implications for anthropological ethnography. The first concerns the paradigm agonisms precipitated by the encounter of anthropology with cultural studies. These “culture wars” have been a source of much heat in recent years, of acrimonious vilifications and reciprocal otherings, and I want here to query where the fires are coming from.

The second relationship is that of the much-discussed interconnection between media and transnationalism. On the one hand, I hold that media produce a kind of transnational subjectification. That is, in the consumption of media, people may develop social imaginaries and senses of community and identity that are supralocal—even when they are not mobile themselves. On the other hand, media production and circulation also generate certain forms of transnational mobility and new types of transnational relations. Importantly, then, television, videos, and other media are not only about meanings harbored within the actual texts: media’s webs of significance are immanent in their social consequences and their relations of production and reception, as well. A fieldworker, then, needs to be attuned to what could be called media’s social effects, to “the translation of cultural texts into contextured texts.”

The third linkage that I want to develop is that of the constitutive role of gender and erotics in the formation of certain transnationalisms. Gendered relations and erotic longings, likewise, may be the substance of transnational imaginings, and may structure transnational mobilities. We need to go further, though, than merely asserting that transnationalism is often gendered, to be able to assert that gender and eroticism in fact drive some forms of transnational practice. To get at how this works, we need to turn back to meaning—toward the contents of the media texts that are implicated in a kind of transnational subjectification.
My exploration of these relationships draws upon ethnographic research in two related aspects. I touch on cultural politics and media consumption in post-Mao China, especially among the Miao ethnic group of China’s southwest. And I investigate media practices of Hmong refugees from Laos, co-ethnics of the Miao in China. These immigrants to the United States have become avid producers and consumers of their own ethnic videos, in multiple genres, and some have traveled back to Asia and have transfigured those voyages into the contents of their media productions. Both the immobile Miao villagers in China and the world-traveling Hmong Americans are implicated, through their deployments of media, in multifarious forms of transnationalism.

**Anthropology, Ethnography, Cultural Studies, Media: Some Polemics**

Although explications of just what the difference is between anthropology and cultural studies continue to be churned out, what I want to pursue here is what makes that difference seem unstable to me, the blurring of boundaries that has, despite proclamations to the contrary, been taking place in practice. I think anthropologists are actually doing more cultural studies than they are willing to acknowledge—what is this about? To be sure, it is largely explicable as an artifact of institutional divides, of the corralling of resources, prestige, and students by the literary disciplines—a process that has embittered so many anthropologists. But I think it is also about what I call the “dread textualism,” the impression on the part of anthropologists that cultural studies has favored texts, popular as they may be, privileging semiotic readings to the neglect of contextualized ethnography.

Is text to ethnography as cultural studies is to anthropology? Yet another boundary has been anxiously marked in the embattled American academy where the political-economy-inspired insights and methods of Birmingham were imported first—albeit selectively—by the literary disciplines. In English and comparative literature, the pressure toward textualist methods has precipitated a decided reshaping, what some would call a hijacking of what—to traffic in canonicity—could be termed the British cultural studies canon. There is the inevitable inertia of the disciplinary conventions that fawn over the textual object, and there is what Stuart Hall noted some time ago already, the swift and heady institutionalization and professionalization of cultural studies in the United States, which spawned all manner of careerist aspirations, of academics doing “what they
think of as critical political work . . . while also looking over their shoulders at the promotions stakes and the publication stakes,” and often digressing, under the constraints of still-disciplinary gatekeeping practices, from the initial problematics of British cultural studies.5

But, returning to U.S. importing practices, as Hall put it, with an implicit sigh: “I don’t know what to say about American cultural studies.”6 The beauty of being an anthropologist, and, yes, I am speaking with irony here, is that I don’t really have to say much. I could just rail against it as a corruption of a more ethnography-based investigation of culture, one that anthropology has long cordoned off as its turf. Somehow, though, I cannot seem to be convinced of the grounds for—to say nothing of jumping on—that bandwagon. It would require too much forgetting of the specific history of how cultural studies made its transatlantic passage. Call me a Birmingham fundamentalist. I think Paul Willis’s Learning to Labor, for instance, was a classic of theory-relevant ethnography that revealed the centrality of culture to working-class reproduction.7 I can’t forget it. But neither can I forget Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, a classic of synthetic cultural critique that finally put race and modernity squarely on the same page—and the arguments were made through close analysis of cultural processes without fieldwork.8 In the end, as Renato Rosaldo consoles, “Losing a monopoly need not be such a bad thing; maybe there is something to be gained from working in more rough-and-tumble arenas where conflict and misunderstanding reign alongside innovative transformations brought by fresh applications and the remolding of familiar terms.”9

I want to turn for a moment, then, to the media object, that incontrovertible presence in so many of our field sites, the same one that it is still de rigueur for so many anthropologists to dismiss as outside our bailiwick. I want to suggest that it is the specific route by which media as research objects made it onto so many of our radar screens, through the imperialistic power of moneyed, strong-voiced literary disciplines’ claims about “culture,” rather than what our fieldwork was relentlessly demonstrating to us, that made the media object such a demonized fetish, deserving only of queasy avoidance. Meanwhile, we have for the most part dodged coming to terms, in any real probing mainstream fashion, with whether and how media make a difference in our work, no matter, in my case for instance, if that work is in Fresno, California, or in the highlands of southwest China. This is not a statement to the effect that all anthropologists should turn toward scrutiny of the media presence in our data. To the contrary, I want to risk making the statement, so that I can subsequently unpack it, that media—movies, television, print, music, advertising—
cannot be an anthropologist’s primary object. This would appear to be launching a salvo directly at some of my heroines (hmm, are they all women?) who have done groundbreaking work in theorizing media and reception—Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, Purnima Mankekar, Lisa Rofel, Mayfair Yang—but that is not what is meant here. I want instead to focus on methodological considerations and another reason dread textualism has remained so intolerable to certain anthropological sensibilities.

What I am intimating, perhaps, is that it is not the diabolical texts that are the problem in and of themselves. More likely it is the centering of them at the heart of research—whether it is to study and interpret them or to strenuously expurgate them as tangential or supplemental to one’s data—that trips us up. Nor is the remedy to situate media products with reference to a context that is by implication not yet mediated. That separation is increasingly hard to make. Lila Abu-Lughod tells a story of an initial field encounter that makes this point eloquently. She talks of arriving in a village and of the “pleasure of recognition” that a local woman and her children evinced when she professed an interest in television. “They brought out their little television set. . . . They invited me to come watch with them any evening, pitying me for not having access to a television set of my own. Television,” she recalls, “bonded us. And this bond began to separate me from other foreigners, people who generally, as the villagers knew, did not follow the Egyptian television melodramas they loved.”

It is not, then, that media need to be contextualized; it is that media are the context: for most of us media are an ineluctable part of our field encounters and we make authorial choices at the level of interpretation as to how much to excise media from what we write up. I am not talking about selection of this data or that in the construction of ethnographic texts—I am talking about taking epistemological positions as to whether media products are constitutive of the social formations and subjectivities we purport to evoke. What is entailed here may be nothing more than an extension to media of what our very own Clifford Geertz suggested with regard to “art forms” almost three decades ago: “Because . . . subjectivity does not properly exist until it is . . . organized, art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display. . . . They are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility.”

Yet the subjectivity–art forms suture is not where we want to stop. I am talking about going further, about also unsettling the text-context distinction, by situating media simultaneously within both, as does Faye Ginsburg when she suggests, “If we recognize the cinematic or video text as a mediating object—as we might look at a ritual or a commodity—then its
formal qualities cannot be considered apart from the complex contexts of production and interpretation that shape its construction.” What would it mean—in terms of research design and methods—to respond to this quandary by taking the phenomenon of media saturation seriously? We have barely begun to entertain this question.

This may appear to be a disciplinary polemic for the recuperation of grounded ethnography, now retooled to be media friendly, a play for the rectification of anthropology’s special domain of expertise. Yet as early as 1988, Janice Radway, critic extraordinaire of the reception of the romance novel, was saying, in the journal Cultural Studies, “I have begun to wonder whether our theories do not impress upon us a new object of analysis, one more difficult to analyze because it can’t be so easily pinned down—that is, the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it.” Is this a simple convergence between anthropology and cultural studies, then, a collective recipe that glibly calls for a large measure of ethnography of the everyday and a dash of media—stirred vigorously? Not for me at least, for I am also compelled by another literary critic, Tania Modleski, who impugns ethnography for its positivist pretensions, its masculinist gaze, and its assumptions of a stark line in the sand between observer and observed. Wouldn’t it be less disingenuous, she suggests, to assume our roles as critics, as activist members of interpretive communities who do things with what they receive as do those we study? Indulge me in an anecdote that allows me to work through some of these questions.

Is It Ethnography or Is It Celluloid?

I am doing fieldwork in rural China in the 1980s. The site is a community of the Miao minority in the mountains of the southwest. These are the mountains farthest from the glittering centers of China’s putative economic miracle, and these are the people on whose backs the much-touted prosperities of the coastal regions are being acquired. As evening falls, I call upon a family, an elite family in which each of the young parents has done a stint living in cities—she for teacher training; he for forestry education. I hope to talk about all the things we have been discussing for months, but talking is not happening that night. The room is darkened, and a tiny black-and-white television with snowy reception commands the living area of their three-room abode. Tonight there is a rare broadcast of an American movie: it is Crocodile Dundee, the story of a roughhewn chunk
of white masculinity from the Australian outback who so entrances a blonde American reporter that she contrives to bring him to New York to get a sexy sensation out of his savage-meets-the-city experience.

I sit down and we watch together. As the New York scenes begin to play through the techno-snow—the dubbed Chinese-speaking voices superimposed on white bodies and only partially audible through the crackle—the room becomes more highly charged. The film becomes a chronicle, which my viewing companions take very seriously, of a first encounter with the Western metropolis. There, cataloged for them—in a text that uses humor to mitigate the discomfort, but at the same time spoofs the alien initiate as he discovers the city’s charms—are the technologies, the conveniences, the displays of affluence, that had once been vilified by Maoist asceticism but under Deng Xiaoping had become the objects of a most acute envious desire. It is a place they do not envision themselves ever going, yet in my presence, somehow, imagining a visit there in the company of a sympathetic American native, becomes more, well, imaginable.

Is this the kind of imagining that Arjun Appadurai urges attention to when he asserts that “more persons throughout the world see their lives through the prism of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms . . . as the ironic compromise between what they could imagine and what social life will permit”? This sort of translocal subject formation is critical, but it cannot be bounded, confined, to the dyadic articulation between media texts and viewer positionings. As Mankekar has pointed out in her analysis of television reception in India, “the viewer is positioned not simply by the text but also by a whole range of other discourses, with those of gender and nationalism being dominant in Indian television.”

Assuming multiple forces effecting subject positionings, how can I get a sense of how an American movie means to certain Miao in southwest China, of the forms of imagining that it inspires or stifles?

I can surmise these things not because I could, through a mechanical interview methodology, elicit from informants a narration of their viewing subjectivity, but rather because I am familiar with the shape of their worlds, the images and structures that constrain and incite their fantasies. I can sense this because I lived with them, because we talked about all manner of things, because the kinds of things that matter to them were deeply impressed on me through myriad encounters and engagements. In some ways these things came to matter to me too, but not because of a kind of naive identification with Miao villagers, a going native, but rather because of the structures that made our worlds proximate. It is not so
much because I got inside their heads, because, to cite a fieldwork great-grandfather, I obtained the “native’s point of view.” It is, more accurately, because I too lived in the ambience of China’s post-Mao public culture, that kaleidoscopic mass-mediated era in which the growth of material disparities spawned a thickening of desires, quests, and frustrations. Watching *Crocodile Dundee* together in China at that historical juncture was not so much about getting at how it played for the other but about the way it played *for us*, and about the intersubjective space in which its reception took place. Elsewhere, I have called this an “ethnotextual” approach to media research.

Does invoking the intersubjective make me one of Modleski’s critics, who, rejecting the pseudo-positivism of ethnography, delves into her own subjectivity to make sense of fieldwork encounters as if they were but other texts? Or, more pernicious, does it implicate me in a sort of power evasion in which my putative mingling of subjectivities with those I have the privilege to travel the globe to learn about amounts to an elision of the privileges that put me in that living room in the first place, standing for whiteness and prompting envy? Is it a dodge for me to emphasize the media object in reflections such as these, displacing my own implication in the orders of difference that put me there and that actually render *me* a text of another yearned-for world? Possibly; and I am not going to attempt a definitive resolution of these questions here. Rather, I want to return to the issue of the disciplinary border transgressions implied by attending to the media-saturated character of these field encounters, and of the kinds of “knowledge” they might produce.

Field moments such as this one defy a forceful expurgation of their media contents. Moreover, they shake what is meant by the field, if the text of *Crocodile Dundee* is partially constitutive of it. Again, the quandary is not new but harks back to earlier struggles over subjectivism and the literary: “In a discipline nurtured in the hothouse of positivism, where ‘to see’ was more than a metaphor, to admit to the literary was tantamount to admitting to the subjective, and the subjective was, unlike the objective, essentially blind.” To confound the metaphor of blindness and sight, then, might we think in terms of a kind of second sight for anthropologists, one nurtured in the age of mechanical reproduction and savvy about the subtleties of representation? Here I would think of the recasting of the notion of the field by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson: “Genres seem destined to continue to blur. Yet instead of attempting to . . . seal off the borders of anthropology from the incursions of cultural studies and other disciplines, it might be a far healthier response to rethink ‘the field’ of
anthropology by reconsidering what our commitment to fieldwork entails.” Likewise, I may be reiterating what Sherry Ortner advocates as a reappropriation of “a larger anthropology in which ethnography, theory and public culture are held in productive tension.” At a minimum, my citing of these strategic reflections effects another way of hinting that what the cultural-studies anthropologists have been so assiduously othering is already here, and may have been for quite a while.

Transnationalism in and through Media

I come to a concern with the very media that have raised anthropological hackles through the concrete conditions of my fieldwork, through the specific types of practices I encountered and my attempts to make sense of them in historical and social context. In 1978, I started working with Hmong refugees in the West, beginning in the years when they were just arriving from over-bombed, war-ravaged Laos, after having become political exiles from a regime they opposed. They had assisted the CIA in a secret war to block the North Vietnamese from stealing through the Lao jungle and to deter the rise of the Communist Pathet Lao. They had hoped in the process to protect a fragment of territory for their own politico-economic autonomy in the Southeast Asian highlands. Instead, when the United States withdrew, they were rendered involuntary migrants, acutely concerned about the depths of their losses—of land, loved ones, lineages, and lifeways. It was in response to Hmong American urgings, spurred by their bereft sense of dislocation, that I had been persuaded to go to China, the wellspring of all Hmong migrations, questing after their cultural roots, their origins. This quest turned so complicated because of the difficulties of recuperating authentic ancestors in the homeland—and I say this with intended irony—that it became my central project instead to understand and position the Miao, co-ethnics of the Hmong, in the specific milieu of China’s cultural politics. The particular vagaries of China’s social and political history were such that the indigenous Miao to be found there had defied appropriation as straightforward emblems of a fading Hmong ancestral past.

Meanwhile, Hmong migrants continued to live out their lives and their identities in a diasporic space—one that increasingly involved participation in an imagined, and highly media-constructed, supranational community. As I was completing the China project, a few Hmong Americans were also becoming transnational border crossers, regularly
voyaging to Asian sites, especially Thailand, Laos, and China, on the strength of their first-world capital and their U.S. citizenship. They were going for tourism and to visit relatives; they were going for business ventures and to import goods especially longed for by Hmong Americans; and they were going for other types of social alliances. A search for homeland brides, mistresses, and girlfriends was key for many of the primarily male Hmong travelers. In the 1990s, there was also a boom in camcorder-toting, world-traversing Hmong Americans who in turn involved many less mobile others in their privileged travel by means of the circulation of images garnered from their Asian voyages. Media practices, then, had become pivotal in securing, generating, and collectively processing Hmong transnationality.25

There are now well over 200,000 Hmong in the United States, with other large refugee populations in France, Canada, and Australia.26 In different communities, they have pursued different strategies for livelihood, including skilled and unskilled wage labor, social-service provision, and reliance on public assistance. Among these strategies, for not a few, is the taking up of technologies of cultural (re)production—for music recording, newspaper publishing, or video making.27 A burgeoning production of Hmong media is not only by amateurs who produce such media recreationally but also by entrepreneurs who have made it their livelihood.28 Videos—shot, edited, and marketed all by Hmong—are in the Hmong language and, like all Hmong media, are targeted exclusively for intraethnic consumption. Shrink-wrapped and usually copyrighted, they sell for up to $30 a piece. Although usually produced for profit, they are not backed by corporate or other advertising interests.

What has struck me most about these new Americans questing simultaneously for roots and opportunities is that so many are engaged in creating representations of their homelands. There are videos that portray Laos, the birthplace of almost all Hmong Americans and the scene 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. Several types 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 re-stagings of war and flight; martial-arts action stories; contemporary (melo) dramas concerning Asian lives; documents of festivals, pageants, and other
events; and an avalanche of music videos. In some cases, the attraction of the tape is precisely in its traversing of untraveled but oh-so-familiar territories—the mountains of China, Vietnam, Burma (now Myanmar).

These tapes invite, or perhaps interpellate, Hmong Americans into a globally diasporic sensibility, one in which they can sense a connectedness to newly fashioned ethno-kin not only in the lands they themselves left behind in their own lifetimes but in more distant Vietnam, Burma, southwest China. Describing immigrant literature, Azade Seyhan has suggested that “by remembering, reappropriating, and allegorizing into language, the ethnic immigrant subject invents a new cultural space for her personal and communal self.”29 This cultural space, media generated for Hmong, is not in the form of a discrete subnational niche but rather sprawls over the globe. To capture the reception effects of viewing such wide-ranging images, I refer to the process of transnational subjectification. But, to go further, I maintain that the transnationality that Hmong media effect is not only at the level of subjectification but also at the level of social relations, of actual mobilities. I sketch here four dimensions that need to be considered in grasping this dialectical character of media and transnationality: production, distribution, consumption, and contents. Like media, transnationalism has also been a subject of much disciplinary and methodological anxiety in recent anthropological practice, and this stems in large part from the elusiveness of fixed research sites. What is called for in tracking these processes is what I call a siteless or itinerant ethnographic method that extends beyond the multisite approach outlined by George Marcus.30 It entails a highly mobile approach to fieldwork, one that permits rapid movement between a range of sometimes ephemeral venues, and one that builds in deep engagement with the texts embedded in these circuits.

Production

Hmong media with homeland themes involve decidedly transnational relations of production. Not only are Hmong American producers themselves traveling to Asia with their camcorders and crews, but they are also involving many local Hmong and Miao in their enterprises. These involvements take many forms. Hmong American producers may hire 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 that performer 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. In some cases, they also subcontract the translation and voice-over work to their co-ethnics in Asia to save labor costs. Video pioneer Su Thao of ST Universal Video, who studied in Hollywood and has produced dozens of videos in Asia, actually maintained an office in Thailand near Wat Tham Krabok, a large settlement of relocated Hmong from Laos. This way he could take advantage of the regular involvement of locals and also expedite his projects. Transnational Hmong media, then, is unthinkable outside of these complex supralocal production modalities.

**Distribution**

Although so many of the most consumable images in Hmong video are from Asia, the circulation of the products is within a decidedly Western sphere. Here, the asymmetries of production relations so conditioned by global geopolitics reemerge in stark relief. Hmong in Asia, although providing the stuff of much of video contents, and the labor for much of their creation, rarely access VCRs on which to view videos. They are not only relatively immobile but also almost entirely excluded from consumer participation in their own intraethnic media flows. Doreen Massey’s notion of “power-geometry” is evocative of the discrepant regional and national positionings of Hmong in relation to what otherwise might appear simply as a unifying communicative medium: “Different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn’t, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement.”

On the other hand, within Western sites of Hmong settlement, distribution is highly elaborated and follows the circuits of long-standing kin, clan, and other kinds of relations. From the United States, where most production is situated, videos are shipped in bulk to France and Australia, where there are smaller aggregations of Hmong, and then ethnic brokers peddle the videos to people in their networks. Occasionally, tapes are sold through ethnic shops as well. Often friends and family members buy the videos and send them directly overseas. Meanwhile, the bulk of sales remain within U.S. borders, where the Hmong population is largest. The most sizable U.S. aggregations are in the California Central Valley and Minneapolis–St. Paul, where the presence of tens of thousands means that Hmong ethnic businesses thrive. Not surprisingly, these are the locations...
of much of the Hmong media production and of the outlets for most direct sales. In every large Hmong community, ethnic groceries have sprung up that market not only a range of Asian consumables but also Hmong media products—cassettes, CDs, and videos. In Fresno, St. Paul, or even Wausau, Wisconsin, there are video shops exclusively for Hmong, offering sales, but mostly rentals, of hundreds of movies. Hmong American festivals, especially large-scale festivals such as Fresno Hmong New Year in late December and the Fourth of July Soccer Tournament in St. Paul, are glutted with open-air stalls where producers and their agents set up tables to display and sell media products. The air at these gatherings of tens of thousands is filled with the blaring noise of competing vendors blasting their best music and videos over huge speaker systems to lure customers by drowning out their neighbors. Video monitors run continuously, showcasing the latest products. Hmong consumers pride themselves on establishing long-standing collections and regularly exchange videos between friends and family. One can thus think of the Western countries in which Hmong are settled as dotted with key nodes through which messages and images of remote sites across the globe are relayed to them.

Consumption

I have spent a good deal of time hanging out at various sales venues, watching people consume and talking to them about their choices. I also spend time in Hmong living rooms around the United States, noting peoples’ media collections, watching videos with them, and talking to them about their consumption tastes. The Hmong ethnographer Jo Ann Koltyk gives an extended evocation of these disparate living-room modalities, beginning with the atmosphere prior to a shamanic ritual:

The air is thick and humid from the smoking joss sticks and the steamy pots boiling on the stove. In the living room, a group of men gather around the television set, watching a videotape filmed in Laos. They chat about the homeland as they watch New Year images flit across the screen. Down the block, another Hmong family is entertaining relatives visiting from St. Paul and Fresno. A video of their family reunion is being made while, at the same time, they watch another video taken of the funeral services of a deceased relative.

In the late afternoon a group of female relatives gather at the oldest relative’s house to talk and sew. One of the women plays a Hmong video filmed in Laos about a man kidnapping a bride. They watch the video three times—with repeated rew windings of the bride capture scene.
In the evening another family sits in front of their television watching a video made in India.\textsuperscript{12} Among the many genres and viewing modalities, I have particularly followed the videos with homeland themes, whether documentaries, dramas, or music tapes, with an eye toward understanding what difference they made in what I have called the forging of transnationality. What desires, what identities and identifications, what alliances, are generated in the Hmong reception of homeland images? The following vignette illustrates some of the viewing subject positions, the range of ways in which Hmong Americans engage homeland material, emphasizing that although its appeal is highly differentiated, video is nonetheless a powerful agent in creating transnational presence in immigrant spaces.

In 1999, I visit a Hmong American grandfather in Philadelphia to find two big crates of videos next to a large-screen television, the focal point of his living room. “This is my history collection,” he tells me. “I am thinking of getting all my videos on DVD, and my tapes on CD, so I can keep them longer.” As he places the first box on the floor for me to sort, his two-year-old granddaughter rushes over to do her own sorting. She extracts tape after tape, strewing them across the living room carpet, glancing with a discerning eye at each one she discards. Finally, she finds the one of her choice. It is \textit{China Part 3} by ST Universal Video. Wordlessly nudging her grandpa, pleading to him with her eyes, she insists that he play the tape. She plucks down in front to watch a kaleidoscope of dancing, singing, and costumes with narration in her first language, which she is only beginning to understand.

The elder tells me that the toddler’s favorite videos are the China dancing tapes and those of Hmong beauty contests. “All the Hmong babies like this kind of video,” comments the toddler’s twenty-eight-year-old father, returning from his class with a quizzical look on his face. His younger sister, a twenty-two-year-old Temple University student, has just told me that she enjoys every genre of videos except the cultural documentaries. “I don’t know . . . I wasn’t born there,” she demurs, defending her disinterest. Her brother concurs, emphasizing that the China tapes are simply not engaging. He watches his daughter sit riveted before the swinging skirts of dancing Miao girls, the crooned melodies of old-time courtship songs, the virtuoso dancing of bamboo-reed-pipe players. He is not drawn toward the screen but speaks directly to me, imputing a nascent ethnic identification to his daughter with a touch of incredulity: “It’s the culture, I guess.” Later I observe that the toddler will throw tantrums if she is not
allowed to dress up in Miao costumes from China. And she is most elated when family members affectionately refer to her by the name of Mee Hang, one of the most famous Miao singers from China. As is typical in so many Hmong households, though the young-adult generation remains nonplussed, both grandparents and young children are employing homeland videos to effect a sense of unity with the most distant of their peoples.

**Reading Homeland Romance**

This kind of devoted fandom is one type of consumption, but I want to turn now to another type, one structured around gendered spectatorship. In the bulk of Hmong American media, homeland desire is distinctly gendered, and here we venture into the imponderables of erotic subjectification. Videos range over the youthful faces and ornate adornments of homeland women, they strategically place attractive women in nostalgia films as a focal point for the gaze of the homesick viewer, and they fashion scripts of courtship, sexual trysts, and marriages to homeland brides. How specifically does the costumed, singing, smiling, traditional woman get constructed as an object of longing? How might her incarnations in media incite forms of eroticism not present, or only latent, before the moment of watching her in so many genres of text? Here I take up the fourth aspect of mediated transnationalism, that of textual contents. The semiotics of homeland representations and the dense intertextuality that characterizes Hmong migrant media become crucial sources of insight. To explore the dimension of textual interpretation, and to make the case for its imbrication with other aspects of media study, I turn to the consideration of one video.

*Dr. Tom*, parts 1, 2, and 3, is a text in transnationality—and I mean that in all its ambiguity, polysemy, and inscrutability. In the late 1990s, the video was, by almost all accounts, the “most popular” of hundreds that were being produced, circulated, and consumed among Hmong from Southeast Asia now living in the United States. Hanging out in a Hmong-run beauty salon in Fresno, I first heard of the then two-part drama *Yuav Tos Tsog Hnub Twg*, colloquially referred to as “*Dr. Tom*.” Shot in Thailand on the spur of the moment with a shoestring budget and an improvised script, the blockbuster is the creation of Ga Moua, formerly involved in the Hmong music scene and a frequent traveler to Asia. 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 in Thailand, part 1 showcases a beautiful saronged young woman who is falling in love with a young man who was raised as her stepbrother after the horrible murder of his parents by a predatory Thai gang as they crossed out of Laos. In jets “Tom,” a Hmong American man, with slicked hair, sunglasses, a cowboy-booted swagger, a camcorder, and claims of being a highly paid “doctor.” Tom immediately begins wooing the girl’s family with money, and convinces them that it would be best for everyone’s future if she marries him. Despite her broken heart, the family gives her away, just in time for her new husband to run out of money and flee to his vindictive first wife in the United States, leaving the girl to wait, wasting her life indefinitely. It is the pain of this waiting that is evoked in the title of the video, which translates roughly as “When will be the day that I am waiting for?”

The more didactic part 2 reveals the gradual demise of the evildoer Dr. Tom, who turns out to be nothing but a janitor in an American doctor’s office. Lying to an uncle-in-law that he needs a loan to start a farm, he garners enough cash to race back to Thailand where he learns that his second wife has abandoned her marriage to him and returned to her original boyfriend. Having been resoundingly rebuked by her now-savvy parents, he 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. Humiliated, he returns home and violently vents his frustration on his wife, who in turn reports him for domestic abuse; he ends up, in a dramatic climax, arrested, handcuffed, and carted off to jail.

What is the social life of this story as it circulates in Hmong America, focalizing issues of gender in transition, of sexual exploitation? The wide consumption of the text makes of a relatively small-scale practice of male homeland sexual adventuring a near-universal concern that touches both men and women in the Hmong diaspora. When I first began watching and thinking about this video, I was intrigued with the question of why the director, a Hmong man and a regular traveler to Asia, would have produced such a morally didactic text. Why would a Hmong man with the potential to access the gender power that homeland touring has offered to male returnees produce a text that comes off as feminist critique? There are, I think, at least two ways of looking at this question.

First, the creation of this story, and its wrenching treatment of the tragedies of the accumulation and abuse of patriarchal power in its border-crossing modality, plays to a feminist market. Some Hmong I talked to
told me that women are the primary purchasers and viewers of the videos, since they are more likely to be at home with limited English and idle time. This seemed plausible for a couple of reasons. For one, the director is in ongoing conversation with his audiences. He says that Dr. Tom was jailed in part 2 because women wanted to see justice done. Meanwhile, he was berated by Hmong men for creating such an unfavorable portrait of them. Indeed, as he tells it, the script for part 3 was designed to make people “happy”—to give them a good message. In part 3, Tom gets out of jail and immediately borrows money to go back to Thailand, where he again strikes out before realizing that he must now go deep into the mountains of Laos to find a family who will fall for his money and his bragging. There he procures another bride, but because he fails to put a halt to his compulsive woman-hunting, she leaves him. Finally accepting his defeat, he returns to the United States to make amends with his first wife, who welcomes him back despite having taken up illicitly with a real Hmong doctor in Tom’s absence. In the closing scene, they are shown reembedded in Hmong American community and morality, walking arm in arm among the crowds of an ethnic New Year festival. Ga Moua’s professed aim to please notwithstanding, disparate readings of his text persist. Some women I have talked to are particularly displeased with part 3, saying, “I would never take him back . . .”

The director’s attempt to placate a female viewership is one possible explanation for why Dr. Tom’s message should come off as so didactic, but there is another way of thinking about how such a gendered critique could emerge from the editing room of an American man. I want here to fuzz up the comfortable categories of production, circulation, and consumption that have been so helpful in cultural-studies method to unsettle any facile binary between authorial intent and audience reaction. Can Dr. Tom, the movie, be thought of instead as a node and a site of condensation for the intersecting concerns of Hmong in discrepant social locations, all nonetheless confronting the desire to forge unities out of radical disparities and finding pleasures and agonies along the way?

The idea of such a video text as a site of condensation rather than a product of a specific authorial intent is supported by the polyglot and collaborative way in which Dr. Tom was made. As the director tells it, it was a Thai driver who suggested the central premise for the film while chauffeuring Ga Moua, camcorder on his shoulder, to visit family members. Ga Moua availed himself of his relatives’ help, recruiting a niece to act opposite him as the beautiful yet reluctant bride.34 Other friends and relatives played the other roles, and they improvised the story and the lines as they
went along. After the release of part 1, audience members, as we have seen, also played a role in the creative process. Their feedback was in large part what, according to Ga Moua, propelled the design of the subsequent scripts. Dilemmas over how the transnational relationship with co-ethnics in Asia was to be carried out, and in turn represented, as well as fractures over gender and geopolitical positioning, all came into consideration as the text grew, not only through the creation of parts 2 and 3, but also in the communal conversations that began to ensue with widening viewership. Indeed, part 3 ends with letters on the screen, a direct address to viewers in the first person plural: “Thanks to all the people who have helped us put this video together and to those who have financed it. If we’ve done anything that’s offensive, please everyone forgive us.” Beyond thinking of this as simply an author’s mechanical response to audience demands, we can think here more concretely of the kind of social space inhabited by the text—one in which the story itself is imbricated in social life—rather than thinking of it as a text in a dyadic relation with audience reactions.

Stealth Erotics

The Dr. Tom story, and its resounding reception within the Hmong American community, shows that ethnic media has a role not only in bringing the images of co-ethnics in distant Asia into Western living rooms for entertainment but also in working through current concerns in the ongoing development of Hmong transnationalism. To read Dr. Tom for its didacticism about ethnic community and morality is to read it only at one level, the level of its overt message. There is, however, an inescapable polyvalence to the text, which issues from the knitting together of its storyline with its rich visuals, its extratextual references, and its social life at a particular moment in Hmong transnationality. What I want to explore here is the unmistakable eroticism that these videos incite, a particular structure of desire that is inextricably bound to the figuring of homeland nostalgia in a romance of lost sexual culture, a cult of the very young woman, and the memory of the most highly charged moments of a distant past, the moments of tender courtship and of the excitement of youthful yearnings. Dr. Tom is never without this doubleness in which contemporary concerns with the ethics and improprieties of transnational practice coincide with the intensity of an almost-palpable nostalgic longing, one
imbued with the most elemental sorts of passions. 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. . . . More, this genre considers the relationship of the transnational filmmakers to their subjects to be a relationship that is filtered through narratives and iconographies of memory, desire, loss, longing, and nostalgia. Memories are fallible, playful, and evasive, and the narratives and iconographies that they produce—in whatever type of film—are palimpsestical, inscribing ruptures, fantasies, and embellishments as well as ellipses, elisions, and repressions.35

Thinking about the polyvalence of *Dr. Tom*, then, also means disaggregating gender and erotics as two distinguishable inscriptions in Naficy’s palimpsest.36 There is without doubt a clear exploration in the film of the problematics of discrepant gender privilege and its exacerbation by transnational asymmetries. But there is also that not-so-subtle evocation, the prodding toward desire that the film relentlessly effects. Listen to these two Hmong responses to the social impact of the film: “The movie warns men about what they shouldn’t do when they go to Thailand or Laos” is voiced commonly by women and men. By contrast, one middle-aged man suggested a fantasy effect to explain the video’s popularity: “It’s what many men want to do, but know that they can’t.” Both responses acknowledge a similar moral message, yet the second allows for a simultaneous indulgence in the pleasure of fantasy.

Let us look more closely, then, at the modes by which eroticism is kindled in *Dr. Tom*. In the process, I develop a meta-argument about method. The erotic dimension is one that is so elusive, so difficult to research in any more than a partial way through interviews and conversations, that it demands of us a reconfiguration of interpretive approaches, an activation of that second sight I described earlier. I am not speaking of an optional supplement to more positivist social science analysis; rather, my premise is that desires and fantasies are so socially consequential that they cannot be ignored and that their incitement through media is so ubiquitous that it must be studied head on. Anthropology must not shrink from deploying a range of reading techniques to get at the kinds of subtleties that are intrinsic to this domain. Some of our tools might be attentiveness to visuals as distinct from but complexly linked to narratives,
awareness of cultural referentialities that potentially condition reception subjectivity within an ethnic population, and close analysis of intertextual devices and conventions that thicken the meanings of any particular text. Moreover, erotics need to be situated in complex and flickering subjectivities, not privileged as dominant structures of feeling that eclipse other sensibilities. As 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.”

No matter how ineffable the process, how unspeakable the effects, then, I have little doubt that Dr. Tom, despite its overt didacticism, is also rich material for fantasy, that it traffics in and generates eroticized homeland longing. The visuals in the film convey a luxuriant sensibility: they ooze with the nuances of a special desire. The central female figure epitomizes a reconstructed Hmong femininity—her long hair flows down her back, and she never appears without a sarong and the mincing steps that accompany that narrow-skirted attire. Despite impoverished camp conditions, she is rounded and healthy; incessant close-ups of her face showcase her drop-dead beauty no matter what is going on in the plot. She always speaks demurely, contriving the softest of voices, while rarely looking Dr. Tom in the eye. The lure of this girl is the lure of nostalgia mingled with men’s longings, longings not only for that feminized icon of home but also for that remembered sexual culture, the courtship of very young girls, the heart-stopping need for one’s object of obsession and the privilege to make one’s conquest.

And conquer he does, for Tom partially achieves his end, procuring a few nights of bliss in bed with his new wife—nights only enhanced by her initial reluctance and her eventual passionate surrender to his embrace. No matter that the film ends with a parting and a judgment at the level of the metatext against Tom as exploiter. Along the way, the bride, having dallied in the conjugal bed for a few nights, has come to profess her love for Tom. In a farewell scene after he has announced his imminent departure, she bashfully confesses her sorrow, her regret, at having underestimated him, and an affection that hints at passions awakened by his virility alone.

At the same time that Dr. Tom works through concerns about community, there is this other aspect, that intangible domain of incitement, the filmic framing of the homeland beauty, her irresistibility. For the many
men who have not returned to Asia, or are contemplating it, the video is the stuff of fantasy, the intimation of romantic possibilities. It is not only reading the images of the object of desire in this one text that makes me so certain about this, but rather reading them intertextually in relation to other images and also in relation to social practice.

One aspect of *Dr. Tom* that makes the homeland woman such an object of longing in the film is that the early part of the text lingers lovingly on her courtship with her local boyfriend. He is an eminently sympathetic character, hardworking, modest, attentive, and upstanding. His impeccable social credentials are signaled by a longstanding Hmong folkloric trope for the good young man, hero of countless tales: he is an orphan. His look is simple, and compared with Tom’s almost campy affect with ill-fitting clothes, neckties, and oversized shades, his is unassuming and almost effeminate. He always puts family welfare first. With Hmong love songs playing softly on the soundtrack, he talks tenderly and with bashful restraint to his new love, daring only to hint at his feelings, although it is evident that they extend to the depths of his soul. His holding back only makes her want him more. When her parents have told her that she must marry Tom, she comes to her boyfriend in desperation, offering her virginity to him first, but he defends virtue, insisting that sexual relations would be detrimental for her imminent marriage.

This dream of reciprocal romantic love is central to Hmong men’s longings for the country from which they have been separated. It is as if the passions of bygone youth are conflated with the affection for their lost land. The rituals of courtship come to constitute a quintessential facet of culture that is imperiled by flight to the United States. Illuminating Anne-Marie Fortier’s assertion that “memory and forgetting work together in the struggle over differing histories and geographies that construct the identity of a place,” it is a situated culture, one that sutures certain memories to specific locales while eliding the present unevenness that characterizes current homeland relationships. This theme comes home strongly in other videos, both fictional and documentary, on homeland topics. One widely sold video entitled *Vib Nais*, after the main Hmong refugee camp in Thailand, is a nostalgic revisit to a site that many Hmong American viewers remember as the place they came of age. Contrary to the mainstream image of the grimy and demeaning squalor of a holding settlement where Hmong were forced to sojourn, this tape explores the feeling tones of the highly charged locales that remain so deeply engraved on the memories of those who made the camp their home, sometimes for over a decade. Having cinematographically surveyed key sites such as the school, the
United Nations office, and the water pump, the tape devotes an especially ample amount of time to the relatively deserted road where young people used to court. The male narrator talks softly, describing with affection the niceties of holding hands, playing, flirting. In a poignant rehearsal of loss, he laments, “Now, I don’t know where my lover has gone. Maybe she still remembers when I was holding her hand and we were together.” The effect is enhanced by the placement of a popular Hmong beauty, Cha Mee Xiong, a stylishly dressed Hmong Thai singer and star of the transnational Hmong music scene, who voicelessly accentuates whatever is the focus of the image.

Intertextual perspectives on romantic-erotic video themes also reveal a nostalgia for a particular kind of male privilege. It is not only gender power but also an intensity of desire that is captured in the evocations of longing for first loves. China Part 3 is a widely circulated video that documents the voyage of a group of almost exclusively male delegates from the United States to attend an ethnic festival in Yunnan. Along the way, they pick up some exotically dressed Miao women (of the Hmong dialect group), who ride their bus with them to the festival like escorts. On-site, the producer and other Hmong American men are seen in their Western trench coats and athletic wear opposite a seemingly endless number of ornamented women much younger than they are. The camera zooms in close, peering voyeuristically at the women’s faces, and depicts them with the men playing a customary ball-toss game traditionally reserved for courtship among unmarrieds. Some scenes even show flirtatious dialogues between the middle-aged men and the demure women.

In another video, the idiom of courtship is even 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 appears 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, like would-be picture-brides, 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 of songs to take back to our men in America.” He chuckles audibly, then asks one of them a key question for the determination of potential marriage partners in the Hmong/Miao clan-exogamous social system:
“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 as a one-way self-marketing opportunity, concerning which their faces convey primarily ambivalence. Like catalogue brides, they communicate, but only from a position of what Ara Wilson 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.40

We can speak, then, not only of transnational subjectification but also of erotic subjectification, as male viewers consume, along with images of homeland beauties, representations of an entire sexual culture that includes such specificities as access to very young women and marriage by capture (both of which are out of bounds in the U.S. legal code).41 Interestingly, in Dr. Tom, part 3, once Tom has reached the highlands of Laos, he is able to procure a bride through one of those traditionally sanctioned methods, a method that would have been transgressive even in the Thai refugee camps and towns depicted in parts 1 and 2. After courting a Hmong village girl to no avail, he assembles some clan members to abduct her as she walks on a deserted path. Once she has been “with” Tom for a short period, presumably losing her virginity along the way, her parents agree to the union. Although for Tom this may be a desperate measure, Hmong viewers know that the video rehearses a time-honored mode of acquiring a bride, one that many remember from their own or their parents’ personal histories but that is now legitimate only in remote places such as the Lao countryside. What I am suggesting is that there is a special aura of desirability that surrounds the homeland woman, an aura born of the culturally particular forms of conquest to which she is subject. In other words, it is precisely these cultural particularities, in an atmosphere of loss and nostalgia, that accrue to the homeland woman’s allure. What plays at one level as pleasurable indulgence in images of courtships past serves at another level as intimations of pleasures yet to be had for the traveler who makes his way to sites of cultural intactness in Asia.

Conclusions

A decade ago, two anthropologists sparred over what was then framed as the postmodernism controversy. Elizabeth Traube did a reading of the
film *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* in terms of what it told us about American social life. His conclusion, however, is in favor of a kind of disciplinary rectification in which he impugns Traube’s authority by asking, “What . . . is an anthropologist doing publishing an article in a journal of anthropology about the meaning of certain cultural artifacts which is based on no ethnographically rooted evidence of what these artifacts mean to ‘the natives’?” Despite Traube’s quip in retort, to the effect that Moffatt is guilty of an “overvaluation of reception,” we are left with a quandary, the still-nagging dilemma as to what, methodologically and interpretively, would constitute a viable encounter with the mediated form.

The debate continues to revolve around the binary of textualism versus social context. In making the case for figuring media as an anthropological object, Abu-Lughod, discussing a television show, makes a bold statement in favor of textualism: “How can we study the encounter between some Upper Egyptian village women and this television serial? With television programs, one is forced to talk not so much about cultures-as-texts as about discrete cultural texts that are produced, circulated, consumed.” Indeed, only by encountering media texts inquisitively, deploying with impunity the reading strategies that have been used for literary and other filmic texts, can we engage them with the depth required to situate them in social life. But my point for the purposes of this discussion is that anthropologists need not privilege the textual per se but rather the sign-saturated social life of which media is one element. In the case of Hmong Americans, and of transnational Hmong community, media is implicated in so many ways—from the economics of transnational production and domestic distribution to the actual relationships forged in production relations to the involvement of audiences in shaping the scripts they want to consume to the incitements to travel and sometimes to pursue erotic attachments across borders. Theorizing social practice, in so many instances, then, cannot be undertaken with the enforced exclusion of media.

Hmong American media can thus be seen as a polyglot enterprise that reveals itself to be a major force in Hmong social life, identity formation, and economic strategies. It emerges out of the historical moment of the camcorder revolution and out of the particularity of Hmong positioning within U.S. ethnoracial stratification. How do immigrants negotiate their cultural practice while undergoing U.S. minoritization? Viewed in the context of dominant media, and a culture of Americanism that disciplines immigrants as particular kinds of subordinated subjects, we might think of
Lisa Lowe’s tenet that “the subject that emerges out of Asian American cultural forms is one in excess of and in contradiction with the subjectivities proposed by national modern and postmodern modes of aesthetic representation,” that “the current social formation entails a subject less narrated by the modern discourse of citizenship and more narrated by the histories of wars in Asia, immigration, and the dynamics of the current global economy.” In this light, Hmong could be seen to be making space for their very particularized narratives, ones that enunciate their own cultural memories, war genealogies, sentiments of loss, and struggles of resettlement. Not only in explicit texts such as war docudramas but even in pop music formed out of the sojourn in Thailand the traces of their specific pasts can be retained and processed.

I hold, however, that it is not the politics of the American site that is the primary shaper of Hmong media, and this is how it differs from case studies in specifically national contexts. Fruitful anthropological work has been done on the kinds of transnational imaginings enabled through the consumption of media products from within particular localities, but the peripatetic character of Hmong media demands more complex methodologies. Generated within webs of diasporic linkage, such media are produced in, circulate in, represent, and structure relations across national borders. Yet such media are far from being generically cosmopolitan. Benedict Anderson has pointed out that “not least as a result of the ethnicization of political life in the wealthy, postindustrial states, what one can call long-distance nationalism is visibly emerging. This type of politics, directed mainly towards the former Second and Third Worlds, pries open the classical nation-state project from a different direction.” This is why I emphasize the imbrication of media with transnational subjectification. “Globalization and image culture do not exist separately first and then interact with each other,” asserts Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. “Image culture has not merely been globalization, nor is globalization merely characterized by the ubiquitous dissemination of transnationally produced images… On a fundamental level globalization and image are inseparable from each other.” It is not only that the relations precipitated by Hmong media—from the transfer of dollars to the transfer of wives to the movement of travelers back and forth across the Pacific—are materially consequential at the supranational scale. It is also that the specific meanings embedded in so many of the texts that are produced can be seen as interpellating Hmong consuming subjects into a kind of border-crossing sensibility, one that sites their identity in no one nation-culture but only in the interstitial spaces they have carved out through millennia of wars and conflicts with
dominant others. This becomes the substance of Hmong collective memory and the focus of all manner of pained reflections on the differences that their dispersal has generated and exacerbated.

A text such as Dr. Tom, then, has a palpable social reality for those it addresses. It inhabits and enunciates the transnational space in which Hmong Americans live. Asked about Dr. Tom, most Hmong I spoke to chuckled or smiled, with a glimmer of irony. Why did they think it was so popular? “Because it’s true,” most of them said. “It’s a real story.” Not that this particular story actually happened, they hastened to explain, but that this kind of thing happens all the time. Some talked disapprovingly about the calculations of Hmong and Miao families situated in the Third World and willing to offer their daughters to secure that transnational alliance that would magically transform their economic fortunes. What the text condenses is a collective concern over emerging cleavages, a painful awareness that beyond horizontal solidarity, Hmong/Miao transnationality is fraught with pitfalls for identitarian aims—a minefield in which those from the West suspect those in Asia of economic opportunism and those in Asia see their Western counterparts as sexual predators. Read at the level of its social life in transnational space, Dr. Tom might be seen as a call for ethnic self-scrutiny in which the wrenching realities of internal exploitation could be brought to light and expelled.

Yet even as the Hmong sense of collectivity spans the globe, augmented by media messages, those same media messages may also play a role in refashioning the most intimate of interiorities. Transnational erotics, such as we see in Hmong media, remixes sex and space, revealing that physical distance and proximity are complexly intertwined in the contours of homeland desire. Elizabeth Povinelli and George Chauncey reflect on these types of configurations by suggesting the way that intimacy and closeness are being reworked: “Globalization studies ask a fundamental question: where are the intimate and proximate spaces in which persons become subjects of embodied practices and times of desire? . . . The reconfiguration of the intimate and the proximate poses a set of interesting problems to theories of sexuality.”52 And likewise to studies of transnationality. My object is to situate erotics not simply in the personal or the psychological but in a transregional cultural economy in which national, ethnic, and racial identities are always implicated and in which global geopolitics participates in shaping longings and fantasies. Such longings and fantasies in turn spur practices that become the stuff of certain transnational linkages.