Situated Knowledge, Transnational Identities:

Place and Embodiment in K-pop Fan Reaction Videos

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Abstract

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This paper explores the K-pop reaction video as a transnational mode of representing place and embodiment. In my analysis, I examine the performances of individual and communal identities in videos created by North American fans of Korean popular culture who film themselves watching music videos for the first time. The K-pop industry has grown to become a truly global sensation, but little has been said about the ways in which fans outside of Korea use K-pop texts as a foundation for expressing their own situated experiences. Unlike many other discussions of transnational and online spaces as disembodied and place-less, it is crucial to recognize the material realities connected to these spaces, particularly on platforms such as YouTube that rely primarily on visual creative expression. I argue that the K-pop reaction video functions to represent the fluid complexities of transnationalism, while also embracing the tangible significance of place, body, and emotion.

Introduction

We react to things that make us feel. Whether it be surprise, disgust, happiness, anger, lust, or excitement, our reactions reveal much about our identities. When we put our vulnerability on public display, we open ourselves to the judgment of others, and surrender to the potentials of establishing relationships based on feeling.[1] Emotions cannot be disconnected from the physical body, as a rigid mind/body dualism is a simplified construction of the way we live our lives. Similarly, as more of our experiences are lived online, we must attend to the simultaneity and fluidity of our virtual and "real" selves. The YouTube reaction video is a unique kind of user-generated text that reflects the overlapping complexities of the emotional, embodied, virtual, and offline performances of authenticity and social engagement. Although few scholars have examined the use of reaction videos by specific communities, it is a necessary component in understanding the ways in which we construct identities and build transnational communities so closely bound up with feeling.

Fans of Korean popular culture (K-pop) have centered the reaction video in their online participatory practices.[2] As a transnational process, the K-pop industry now constantly creates products that are inherently hybrid and marketed to a global audience (Kim, 2016; Kim, 2013). Perhaps the most enthralling and anticipated of these products are the elaborately manufactured music videos, which fuel this reaction video phenomenon. YouTubers will set up a camera and film themselves watching a music video for the first time as a means of a mediated and

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, I use "feeling" and "emotion" interchangeably, rather than delving too much into discussions of affect. I believe that feeling and emotion are more indicative of the functions of the reaction video, as opposed to affect, which may connote sentiments prior to cognition that diverge from my interest in connective relationships.

[2] To read more about this notion of "participatory culture," specifically related to fan cultures, see the work of Henry Jenkins. In *Convergence Culture* (2006), this concept is explored in more detail, and may be applied to add greater depth in understanding my contribution to fan communication scholarship.

"authentic" co-viewing experience with others within the K-pop fan community. Their performed authenticity functions as a communicative process via social media and is representative of a larger narrative of transformative mediated practices and identity construction.

Physically dispersed, but affectively connected, K-pop fans around the world have formed a dynamic community that imagines itself as transcending national boundaries. While this certainly does not negate the significance of one's situatedness within a specific nation and culture, it does speak to the accessibility of online spaces for engagement with others who share qualities other than those dictated by the nation-state. And it is impossible to discuss fan identity without attending to emotion. For those who actively participate in the transnational K-pop fan collective, and for many fans of any entertainment media more generally, there is an emotional attachment to their popular culture transmedia narrative. This devotion can inspire individuals to move beyond simply enjoying the music or applauding the artists' talent to engage with popular culture in ways that are creative, empowering, and truly transformative (Jenkins, 2006). Feeling in fandom is about intimacy – not just with the object of one's affection, but also with other fans. "Emotions," writes Sara Ahmed (2004), "are bound up in how we inhabit the world 'with' others…they are about the intimate relationship between selves, objects, and others" (p. 28).

In this paper, I aim to explore the importance of identity and community engagement with Korean popular culture, and the intricate ties to place and the body. To better understand the complexities of the global flows and uses of media images, communication scholars must avoid reducing identities to a utopian ideal of universal fluidity and instead attend more to the impacts of space and affect (Shome, 2011). These spatial and emotional dimensions are crucial in critical discussions of spaces like YouTube where the boundaries between online and offline, private and

public, and the "real" and the "virtual" are blurred. In my analysis, I demonstrate that, although we assume the global consumption of media to be a relatively disembodied practice, embodiment is an essential dimension in forming and sustaining pop culture communities. By employing a transnational, feminist framework and conducting a visual reading of K-pop reaction videos, I examine their performative functions and their significance within the online, English-speaking fan community. I argue that these reaction videos reveal one's ties to space and body, while also acting as a vehicle for identity construction and building communities of feeling that transcend boundaries we assume to be un-crossable.

Literature Review

The age of globalization and the ease of transnational media flows complicate the ways in which we understand culture and identity, both in mediated representations and our personal identifications. While it is tempting to assume that transnationalism implies moving toward increasing cultural hybridity and detachment from national boundedness, to speak of identity as becoming totally fluid is to naively ignore the physical dimensions of transnational media consumption and circulation. Although our technologies and global connectivity do indeed disrupt our assumptions about the divisions between the national and international, a transnational framework necessitates a consideration of the specificity of space and place within which identities are constantly being reshaped and reproduced (McGinnis et al., 2008; Schwartz and Halegoua 2015; Shome, 2003). Furthermore, while transnationalism does describe the multiple flows between socially constructed "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), online and offline, those tied to the nation-state, and those defined by shared culture or affinity, it does not negate the material realities of our global connections and disconnections. To speak of

transnationalism is to speak of the multiplicity of identity and agency, the overlapping structures of power, and the spatialized and affective dimensions of the body (Shome, 2011). This inclusion of the physical body in theorizing transnationalism, especially when integrating ideas about digital technologies which are so often constructed as detached from reality, is particularly important. "The human body," writes Marwan Kraidy (2013), "is the indispensable medium, a nexus of discourse and action, a pivot articulating materiality and virtuality, a linchpin of communication and revolutionary change" (p. 287).

The visible body is central to YouTubers' participation in fandom and the relational connectivity of reaction videos. The corporeal properties of this type of creative production allow fans to subversively insert emotion and imagination into the reception of media texts that are carefully manufactured by corporate entities. These felt connections to K-pop idols and to other fans may be conceptualized as distinct from and inferior to rational Western thought, but the body acts as a bridge between multiple modes of consciousness, and as Gloria Anzaldúa writes: "Nothing is separate. It all filters through from one world to another" (2009, p. 119). This is not to say that we have moved beyond the top-down domination of the industry in favor of an idealistic, affective market driven by fans. The massive companies in the Korean pop industry are certainly familiar with the best practices for utilizing social media for their own benefit, and know how to generate sales and popularity of their artists based on strategically developing hybrid forms of performance (Kim, 2016). And it is important not to overemphasize the agency of users, despite the democratization of platforms for creative user-generated content. Fan labor, even when we conceive of it as a labor of love, is still a factor in the economy of YouTube and the user still maintains multiple identities of producer, consumer, and data provider (Van Dijck, 2009). Furthermore, not all participants have equal shares in the social media economy as

"corporations…still exert greater power than any individual consumer…And some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than do others" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). While we must keep these power imbalances in mind, these factors do not disintegrate the power of fandom. There is still something to be said for the ways in which fans may base their connections and emotional attachment on K-pop content, but move beyond the endcoded meanings of the original text and use it for their own personal and communicative advantages. Previous discussions of the powerful transnational dimensions of K-pop and its more traditional media structures have not adequately addressed the importance of feelings in fandom, and I aim to insert more emphasis on embodiment in discussions of transnationalism specifically.

The multidirectional flow of popular culture is not a new phenomenon. Systems of power and dominance maintain the supposed supremacy of Hollywood in the global media landscape (Iwabuchi, 2008), but the massive surge in popularity of South Korean entertainment worldwide certainly challenges this assumption. While there is not a reciprocal exchange between the dichotomous East and West when it comes to the reception of entertainment media, the Korean Wave[3] has marked a "global shift" in the transnational flow of popular culture since the late 1990s and early 2000s (Hae-Joang, 2005; Kim, 2013). This shift is due largely to the affordances of social media, which has led scholars to hone in on online communities and individual, collective, and connective engagement with K-pop to add greater depth to discussions of international and cross-cultural fan practices (Baek, 2015; Jung, 2011; Kim et al., 2014). Many

[3] There are too many sources on the Korean Wave to cite them all, but the most influential to this article include: Chua, B. H., & Iwabuchi, K. (Eds.). (2008). *East Asian pop culture: Analysing the Korean wave* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.; Kim, Y. (2013). *The Korean wave: Korean media go global*. Routledge.; Hong, E. (2014). *The birth of Korean cool: How one nation is conquering the world through pop culture*. Picador.; Lie, J. (2014). *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*. Univ of California Press.*;* Jin, D. (2016). *New Korean Wave: Transnational cultural power in the age of social media*. University of Illinois Press.

scholars have also utilized ethnographic, interview, and survey methods to interact directly with fans in countries outside of East Asia to better understand K-pop's appeal and participatory culture. Explorations of the K-pop subculture have revealed the importance of fan networks, both in online and offline spaces, in many countries around the world (Hübinette, 2012; Igno and Cielo, 2016; Ko and Kim, 2014; Noh, 2010; Otmazgin and Lyan, 2014). Eun-Young Jung (2009) argues that notions of hybridity work well to account for this rapid international diffusion of Korean popular music, noting that K-pop is intentionally stylized as a messy mixture of the foreign, local, and everywhere in-between. The content of K-pop has been shaped by Western media, but it has also been re-evaluated, re-negotiated, and transformed through the continual, concurrent work of industry moguls and fans alike. This essence of hybridity, and its allusion to the convergence of familiar self and distant Other, calls into question notions of an essential cultural or national identity (Bhabha, 1994; Jung, 2009; Ono and Kwon, 2013).

In the context of fan participations on YouTube, hybridity is articulated in both the material and "virtual" bodies. It is illustrated through the "freedom" of self-expression afforded by the in-betweenness of online spaces, but it is also filtered through national and cultural norms. While hybridity does insinuate potential empowerment through subversion, it must also be understood as a situated communicative practice that is complexly related to sociopolitical, economic, and cultural positions (Kraidy, 2002). We cannot risk de-politicizing issues of difference and identity, as they are central to the meaning-making process and are continually shaped by space and place (Shome, 2003).

The K-pop reaction video is a creative intervention that resists the reproduction of Eurocentric ideologies in the digital realm through individuals' uses of voice and visibility. As an imagined world defined by image and narrative, and built through users' global interaction on

social networking platforms, this "social mediascape" of Korean popular culture encourages the participatory practices of dedicated fans (Jin and Yoon, 2016) who perform a wide variety of racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities. Their emotional engagement with media texts and other members of their community is founded on love, a powerful tool for social transformation. This kind of radical affection and affinity within transnational communities and articulated through the reaction video works toward the decolonization of cyberspace (Sandoval and Davis, 2000). Online spaces need self-regulated representations of difference, other ways of knowing, and the embodied presence of people with marginalized identities who make valuable do-it-yourself contributions to the social mediascape. Media, particularly the active consumption of media produced "elsewhere," can no longer be seen simply as a means of escape or passive reception, but instead it is processed through the collective imagination to become an organized practice and the center of individual agency (Appadurai, 1996).

Justification of data selection

To bypass potential industry constraints and cultural, linguistic, and physical barriers, the K-pop fan community outside of Korea has taken up participatory practices on YouTube to connect and collaborate. Reaction videos are a significant demonstration of fans' invested, embodied engagement with popular culture as they showcase a sense of vulnerability and an authentic emotional attachment to particular media texts (Warren-Crow, 2016). To gain a better understanding of the international K-pop fan community and their creative uses of new media, I examined reaction videos made by three of the most popular K-pop YouTubers. I determined popularity primarily by the total number of views and number of subscribers, as well as mentions

by other members of the fandom on blogs, forums, and other YouTube videos.[4] In the age of the YouTube celebrity, popularity is a justifiable basis for analysis because it indicates a certain level of authority recognized not primarily by the centralized industry, but from fans themselves (Chen, 2016; Lange, 2007; Smith, 2014). I want to emphasize that popularity, in the most general, quantifiable sense, is not determinate of quality, but instead reflects notable relevance in the circulation of fan-produced texts.

Based on the statistics available on the page of each individual channel, all three were established from 2011-2012, and have been regularly updated into 2017. This continued channel maintenance indicates that there is still a stable audience for commentary on both music videos and the K-pop fandom at large, and that these specific American YouTubers play important roles in the online (and offline) community. At the time of this study, Asian American YouTuber JREKML[5] has perhaps the most prominent channel featuring K-pop-related content, with nearly one million subscribers and over one hundred and seventy million views. Although he shares his channel with his cousin, she does not appear in more recent videos and JRE claims the spotlight. Another channel receiving much general praise from in-group members is 2MinJinkJongKey, or Cortney and Jasmine, two young African American women[6] who describe themselves as "best friends who are unhealthily in LOVE with kpop" [sic]. Finally, TrulyMaliceKpop,[7] another

[4] Some online/fan references include: allkpop.com; http://kbeat.net/article/my-favourite-k-pop-reactioners/; onehallyu.com (forum discussions); https://www.wattpad.com/36209636-the-book-of-k-pop-rants-my-favorite-k-pop; https://www.reddit.com/r/kpop/comments/3bpvda/what_is_your_favourite_reaction_to_kpop_video_you/ (reddit thread)

[5] In earlier reaction videos (2012), JRE clarifies his race in the titles of his videos. Self-identifies as: "Half Asian man," "Sexy asian male," "Tired asian male," and "Epic Half Asian Male." (https://www.youtube.com/user/JREKML1/videos?view=0&sort=da&flow=grid)

[6] Cortney and Jasmine do not explicitly state their racial identification, but their commenters have been cited to use visual "clues" to racialize them anyway (see: Chun, 2017).

[7] Michael Smith-Grant has frequently changed the actual username associated with his channel and also participates in a number of online communities under various pseudonyms (which is why under some fan blogs or forum discussions, he is named as "MisterPopo" or "MisterPopoTV").

African American fan also known by his real name Michael Smith-Grant, is an active member and authority figure in the K-pop fan community. He is a contributing member of Seoulwave, an English-language resource for the discussion of all things related to Korean popular culture, and often collaborates with others when filming reaction videos. The boundedness of nation, though flexible and changing in the age of globalization, is still relevant to our lived experiences and social locations (Shome, 2003), and my choice to focus on North American K-pop fans is intentional. This exploration is not an attempt to universalize the experiences of individuals situated within the United States, but instead reflects a specific cultural context constraining one's online and offline realities. I have chosen to examine these YouTubers' performances of fluid, transnational identities that have been shaped, but not dictated, by Western logic and that are "lived out within the dominant social order by subjugated populations who do not 'fit'" (Sandoval and Davis, 2000, p. 168). These characteristics are implicated further as each of these prominent K-pop YouTubers are non-White, and the visibility of Black and Asian bodies adds an important dimension to the potentials for digital decolonization, or "the re-imagining and re-structuring of existing systems of domination" (Ono and Kwon, 2013, p. 210).

While "success" should not insinuate that these YouTubers are somehow more credible or legitimate than other contributors or community members, their centrality does set them apart as representative voices on this specific platform. Although the circulation of some videos may be short-lived and the dynamics of YouTube popularity are constantly changing (Benevenuto et al., 2009), the reaction video as a genre retains its significance as a way to sustain more valuable connections within the community. The reaction videos I focus on in this paper function as evidence of the desirability of K-pop performers and K-pop's massive global appeal, but even

more significantly, they allow people to view music videos in "virtual synchronicity" which helps fans maintain affective connections (Chun, 2017).

Although there is a rich body of literature on YouTube, few scholars have done research on the reaction video, and its function as a means of communication among international communities has been relatively under-theorized. Feminist media scholar Heather Warren-Crow (2016) interrogates reaction videos, vocal performance, and immaterial labor, concluding that "Successful reaction videos respond to work's placelessness in the nowhere-everywhere of online media by positioning labor within an individual body via the 'involuntary, incontrovertible' squee or gag" (p. 1116). This "placelessness," evidenced through K-pop's systematic hybridity, in conjunction with the reaction video's emphasis on "the mercurial divisions separating…action from reaction, creator from audience, thing from assessment of thing" (Garber, 2016), among other imagined binaries, make it a quintessential model for a modern form of transnational participatory media. To the extent that YouTube supports innumerable different communities with which to identify (Strangelove, 2010), K-pop YouTubers invite others to exist in multiple communities at once. Not only are viewers able to actively participate in the uninhibited feelings of fandom, but they can also revel in sharing a YouTubers' visible differences and contribute to larger discussions of culture and identity.

Reaction videos are particularly useful texts to study when exploring the omnipresence of communities that are inherently hybrid, but primarily sustained through feeling and emotional attachment. While my focus is on the user-generated self-surveillance of the music video reaction, YouTube is rife with people unboxing products, tasting new foods, playing video games, and watching pornography trailers. In the more democratized space of the web, audiences can use reaction videos to bring themselves into the media narrative, and to participate in popular

culture in a new way. The reaction video as a communication tactic centralizes shared meaning that brings people together and expands far beyond a singular object. Watching these videos evokes a sense of togetherness, and viewers can live vicariously through others experiencing something for the first time (Anderson, 2011). When centered around a visual event such as the release of a music video, this communal experience has few equivalents. As culture writer Megan Garber (2016) states, "The reaction video may be about people watching people; it is also, however, about the pleasures of watching as a group. As an audience. As a fandom. As a public." This group dynamic allows people who may not be able to find many other fellow K-pop lovers in their regional vicinity to collectively engage with other fans dispersed all over the world.

People in the K-pop fandom contribute many other types of filmed content, but because music videos attract the largest online audiences on YouTube (Strangelove, 2010), their centrality in these reaction videos adds to the potential for a larger viewership, and therefore, greater influence. To make my selection more manageable, I narrowed my focus to a relatively small sample of videos from these three channels, and based my choice on several qualifications, including the global reception of artists, popularity of individual songs within a similar sub-genre, and relative similarity in video structure. Because reaction videos are generally accepted as featuring a first-time experience, I did not rely heavily on the upload date, but instead chose artists and songs that appeared on at least two of these YouTube channels. Being able to compare different reactions to the same music videos strengthens the theoretical implications for place and embodiment, as the YouTubers are all speaking from the same imagined position within the same contextualized media narrative.

To get an accurate reading and understanding of general themes and performative practices, I looked at reaction videos that featured the following music videos: "BANG BANG BANG" and "FXXK IT" by Big Bang, "Daddy" and "Napal Baji" by PSY, "Hello Bitches (Dance Performance)" and "Baddest Female" by CL, "Boombayah" and "Playing with Fire" by BLACKPINK, and "Blood Sweat & Tears" and "Dope" by BTS. These artists themselves hold significance in the international K-pop community, and thus add a further valuable dimension. Big Bang has achieved one of the largest fan bases both locally and abroad, and their dedicated musical and stylistic inspirations from hip-hop culture add to their American appeal. Both PSY and CL have been featured on television programs in the United States, and have attempted more cross-cultural promotions and generated much attention with their videos online. And finally, BTS and BLACKPINK are a young male and a young female idol group, respectively, and have generated some of the most recognition and circulation among K-pop fans at the time of this paper's production.[8] Again, while popularity does not ensure quality, focusing on artists that are well-known and well-liked within the fan community, and even beyond, allows me to better understand the functions of the genre itself. By examining reaction videos that centralize releases by popular artists, I can hone in on the user-generated content, visual representations of self, and its community significance, rather than also considering factors such as the novelty of a new group debut, English-language releases, or other potential significant in-text variations.

My specific focus on K-pop stems from a personal history of participation and self-identification within K-pop-centered online communities, as well as a recognition of the ongoing and multifaceted significance of this particular fandom in the lives of international fans.

[8] The reader should also note the increasing salience of BTS in the Western media industry. As of May 21, 2017, BTS was awarded "Top Social Artist" at the Billboard Music Awards, becoming the first K-pop group to win this type of award (http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/22/entertainment/k-pop-bts-billboard-music-awards/).

Therefore, I recognize my own subjectivity in interpreting these YouTube texts and my understanding of the international K-pop community's investment in fandom, but also believe my contributions add a necessary dimension to previous scholarship on K-pop that often stems from an outsider perspective. I also acknowledge the challenges of online content's temporality and the permeable boundaries of the digital sphere that are by no means wholly inclusive. While we are able to critically engage with public texts, it is also important to remember that fan communities are safe spaces that foster in-group interactions and their members likely do not anticipate the intrusion of academics. Despite the public accessibility of YouTube videos, I aim to work toward what fan studies scholar Brittany Kelley (2016) has called "a goodwill ethics heuristic approach" that constantly considers the responsibilities of one's positionality as a researcher in the academy in relation to the people in the communities we study. Therefore, to maintain my transparency and vulnerability, I have contacted the specific YouTubers I have mentioned by name in this analysis, and have articulated both my position and intent before analyzing the videos they produce.

Dance and movement as transnational embodiment

One of the common characteristics of individuals' reactions to music videos is the integration of physical movement. As the beat drops to reveal the hard-hitting EDM chorus of Big Bang's 2015 release, "BANG BANG BANG," JRE moves his body to the electronic sounds, pumping his arms in time with the rhythm and swaying his torso back and forth. His hand gestures mirror those of Big Bang's five group members, and he continues to mimic elements of the choreography throughout the video. The same chorus evokes a similar reaction for Cortney and Jasmine who simultaneously bounce to the music. As the song progresses, the music video

shifts to a shot of women in eye-catching white shorts and skirts gyrating slowly and seductively under golden lights. Almost instantly, Cortney begins to move her body similarly within the frame of the reaction video and says that "we could be in this –" before cutting herself off in frustration. These movements, in harmony with those of the performers in the music videos, act as a connection that is both situated and transcendent, taking up multiple spaces at once, but not contained or defined by any one space. The impulse to move along with the music is an emotional reaction that blurs the separation between body and mind. Dance becomes a way of knowing, and a way in which the YouTubers deepen their participation as authorial figures within the international K-pop community. Separated by geographical boundaries and distance, their embodiment, and the perceived subsequent or simultaneous embodiment of others, allows them to actively claim a physical space in fandom.

Although scholars have interrogated the dancing body of the K-pop idol, often emphasizing the commodification of the body (Kim, 2011; Unger, 2015; Epstein and Joo, 2012), fans' embodied practices, especially those in online spaces, have been relatively neglected. With some affordances of anonymity and physical distance, the internet has been a fruitful site for users to explore their multiple, intersecting identities, but because YouTube is used as a more visual, interactive, candid, and "authentic" form of social media, the body is a crucial site for knowledge production, performed identity, and social engagement. Within the ideological confines of a globalized Eurocentric patriarchy that devalues emotion and physical demonstrations of feeling (Johnson, 2003), the reaction video and fan community are safe places in which to participate in these other ways of making meaning and subverting dominant discursive practices. Dance, as the "discourse of the body" can be indicative of certain societal prescriptions of racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities when put on public display

(Desmond, 1993) and can also be a visual tactic to explore the fluid potentials of one's personal and communal identities.

Movement in conjunction with vocalized expression strengthens the encoded and decoded meanings within the reaction video (Hall, 2001). Whether it be unrestricted "screaming like a girl" (Warren-Crow, 2016), or the natural incorporation of Korean pronunciation of group members' names into English-language conversations (Chun, 2017), these YouTubers perform an authenticity where vocalization cannot be functionally disconnected from physicality. The reaction video is simply not as interesting or believable without some integration of reactive dialogue, emotional screams or gasps, and conversation that articulates insider knowledge and that often encourages audience participation. Even Michael Smith-Grant's laughter at the perceived absurdity of BTS' wardrobe illustrates his attempt to showcase an authentic self who does not take the participation in viewing that seriously. Viewers can see the body of the person laughing, and because he is a familiar, self-identified fan of K-pop, his laughter can be understood as lighthearted enjoyment, rather than malicious ridicule.

This characteristic of the reaction video makes dance notably different from the rehearsed choreography in dance cover videos, although they do share some functional similarity through the ability to identify across gender and race. Sun Jung (2011) articulates the connection between fans' performativity in dance covers and their subversion of normative constructions of gender through shifts between "boy group" and "girl group" choreography. This choice of performance based on style, rather than strict binary divisions, is one way in which international fans claim a sense of control that does not align with dominant industry decisions (Khiun, 2013). Dance as a mode of self-expression and identity play accentuates the importance of the physical and material experiences within popular culture.

When the Asian American male YouTuber JRE begins to dance along with the female K-pop group BLACKPINK during "BOOMBAYAH," he is not participating in the typical active-male, passive-female mode of spectatorship, but is instead identifying across boundaries of gender. This identification across the presumed boundaries of Western male heterosexuality is further implicated in JRE's more fluid performances of gender and sexuality throughout his reaction series. While watching CL's "Baddest Female," JRE breathes heavily, beats his chest, and consistently addresses the celebrity with objectifying comments. His sexualizing of the female Other reinforces his assumed heterosexuality and American masculine norms, however, he becomes a similar voyeur for male group BTS. He frequently calls out each member's name, cheering on their impressive choreography or expressive machismo, but also moves along with their seductive caresses and body rolls, and edits a sequence during "Blood Sweat & Tears" to emphasize his wide-eyed lust when member "V" licks his lips. The co-consumption of K-pop music videos implicitly encourages viewers to also feel more comfortable expressing their identities along a spectrum, rather than trying to fit into culturally-constricted binary boxes. By scripting dance, movement, and identification according to a variety of individual experiences and locations, fans playfully and deliberately subvert the strict gendered divisions of the K-pop groups they love.[9] These acts then allow performers – both those participating in dance covers and those creating reaction videos – to "recalibrate the socio-cultural contours to which they have been subjected within their individual local contexts" (Khiun, 2013, p. 179).

[9] Although there are certainly successful solo K-pop artists, groups are generally divided into "boy groups" and "girl groups," and are primarily discussed as such among English-speaking fans. A few mixed-gender groups have debuted (such as Sunny Hill and Co-Ed), but they did not experience as much longevity or success as gender-segregated groups. One exception to this may be mixed-gender "collaborations," or singles released by a temporarily-formed sub-group composed of members signed under the same company (an example of this is the 2017 release of "365 FRESH" by Triple H, a group composed of one woman and two men under Cube Entertainment).

Performing fandom through the affective labor of dance covers allows the performer to become intimately connected to the K-pop idol they are embodying through dedicated imitation of the idol's behavior (Käng, 2014). This is one crucial point of divergence when we understand movement within the reaction video. Rather than practicing the art of mimicry and playing the role of a K-pop idol, fans create reaction videos as a mode of self-expression to connect communities through deeply personal emotional ties, and not as an intimate extension of the pre-established connection between fan and their "bias."[10] These YouTubers' seated dancing and their impulse to attempt to move in time with choreography they are seeing for the first time is a mode of performative authenticity during which their feelings pour out through physical movement. It is restrained by the material set of the video, yet uninhibited by their emotive expression. Supposing we as viewers share a K-pop fan identity, we are also able to synchronize our emotional pirouette. The use of movement in reaction videos, then, is embedded in the emotional dimensions of individual and communal identification, and even in these blurry online/offline, public/private spaces, this movement "does not cut the body off from the 'where' of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 27).

Place and the intimacy of the publicly private

Fandom is a space within which binaries are consistently broken. It frequently disrupts the relationship between subject and object by returning the gaze and redistributing power in creative production, thus inherently asserting a feminist orientation (Busse, 2013). These inextricable links to feminism make it impossible to theorize transnational fan creations without

[10] In the English-speaking K-pop fandom, it is common practice to identify a favorite member of a particular group by using this term. While some fans may take this to an excessive level of fetishization or possession, I would argue that it is generally a relatively innocent practice, similar to choosing a favorite character in a television series.

considering issues of difference and performativity in conjunction with intimacy and vulnerability. In the context of the K-pop fandom, the reaction video functions as a public confirmation of individual and collective fan identity, but also acts as a vehicle for affective investment, embodied knowledge, performance, and social interaction. Transnational media images call into question "the efficacy of clearly demarcated national boundaries and identities" (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 52), and YouTube is a platform that reflects of this lack of boundedness and showcases multiple realities. K-pop fans who choose to represent themselves through reaction videos embrace this transnational mode that is literally "as private as one's living room and as public as the internet" (Antebi, 2009). In the context of their reaction videos, YouTubers produce content that is domestic, emotional, subjective, and immaterial, all of which are characteristics typically associated with "feminine" behaviors (Busse, 2013). In doing so, they contribute to the deconstruction of spatial and gendered boundaries and allow their fan-viewers to share in this interstitial engagement with Korean popular culture that relies on embodied structures of feeling rather than the hegemonic power structures of Western norms.

As their video begins, Cortney pulls herself together after four deep breaths: "I feel like this is like, about to be too real." This preface to Cortney and Jasmine's reaction to "Blood Sweat & Tears" by popular boy group BTS immediately primes viewers to anticipate an authentic, emotional reaction, as the YouTubers are already visibly excited before even pushing the play button. Interestingly, their immediate interaction is not with the primary music video text, but instead, they directly address the viewer(s). This initial conversational tone with their audience further illustrates YouTube's social networking functions, as it moves beyond simply sharing videos or even posting comments to create social connections. Their revelatory in-video commentary and intentional self-surveillance work to create a "publicly private" means of

communication where the YouTubers reveal personal information and typically "private" feelings in a publicly accessible forum (Lange, 2007). Unlike some other reaction video creators who position their bodies diagonally toward an out-of-shot screen, 2MinJinkJongKey's standard set-up is front-facing and their body language mimics that of a real life, face-to-face interaction. These YouTubers take on the performative role of friendship, embracing a "new authenticity" that emphasizes presentation, interactivity, and expertise (Tolson, 2010), and highlights visual intimacy and public vulnerability (Gibson, 2016).

Raka Shome (2003) argues that critical scholars cannot continue to rely on speaking of space metaphorically, as space plays a crucial role in the production of cultural power and politics. The ways in which we understand our identities are inseparable from the spaces we inhabit. As Shome (2003) writes, "identities occur not just anywhere but *somewhere*; social agency is derived not just anywhere but *somewhere*" (p. 42). K-pop fans, both YouTubers and their viewers, can utilize the fluid affordances of the simultaneous material and virtual space of the reaction video to rework and reproduce their own identities with less bounded, preconceived constraints. To speak of this public/private space, then, is to speak of a transnational framework that necessarily looks at local situatedness, while also recognizing the fluctuating impact of the global (Shome, 2011). Although the meaning and use of domestic space in relation to media and communication varies from culture to culture (Lull, 2000), the practice of consuming these texts – especially for fans outside of Korea who do not have as much access to attending concerts or meet-and-greets with their idols – is a shared experience simultaneously situated in multiple online/offline spaces.

It is no coincidence that many of these visual events take place in the home. The mise en scène does not only emphasize a certain level of intimacy based on the proximity and familiarity

with the YouTubers, but also reflects what New York Times writer Sam Anderson calls "the radical vérité home-movie aesthetic" typical of the genre (2011). Cortney and Jasmine have done little to alter the background of their videos, which is filled by a large shelf with books scattered about haphazardly and is reminiscent of what many of us may find in our own homes. This reinforces feelings of spontaneity and credibility, and acts as an invitation to gaze into the YouTubers' everyday lives. Although we are not able to interact directly with these women, we feel connected through the love of K-pop and the simultaneity of textual viewing, and we are able to breach the barrier between public and private spaces. The music video may have its origin "elsewhere," but our felt intimacy in the space in-between, the space in the home and on YouTube, can work to neutralize feelings of displacement. The reaction video acts as a bridge to another world, both similar and different to our own material reality. The choice to film in a specific location – that is, in a comfortable living space – accentuates the effects of the personal in the transnational viewing experience.

The home also reifies the ties between economics and gender embedded in media fandom (Busse, 2013), and this domestic setting is consistent across all three channels I examined. Michael Smith-Grant's series of reaction videos entitled "Black People React to Kpop" are generally characterized by relatively low production quality and a familiar, bedroom setting. The YouTuber and his brother, both young, Black American males, sit slouched in leather desk chairs, facing an out-of-frame screen as they watch BTS dramatically enter an art museum before the music swells. The other-worldly "nested text" highlights the non-linearity of the reaction video's participation structure (Chun, 2017), that we are watching a video within a video, while also emphasizing the intimate private space in which the men have situated themselves. The fantastical, clearly commodified scenes in the music video contrast with the casual atmosphere

and reality of the young men in the reaction video. These "Black People React to Kpop" videos explicitly take up an authentic racialized and gendered performativity that challenges normalized expectations of what media Black men consume, while also effectively blurring the public and private. Not only do these men publicly broadcast their pleasure in watching this performance, but the inclination to centralize their authentic reactions unsettles the assumption that it is primarily young (and often White) female fans who are emotionally invested in pop music and pretty boys (Busse, 2013; Lewis, 1992). Reaction videos work to publicly subvert dominant discourses of authentic identity through connective performances in private spaces.

Performative authenticity and identification across bounded identities

Discussions of globalization may slip into an idealistic progress narrative that does away with national/cultural constructs altogether, but we cannot ignore the persisting significance of the nation. Transnationalism highlights global flows and permeable national/cultural boundaries, but in doing so also sheds light on the unevenness of cultural exchange and the continuing importance of distinguishable identities (Iwabuchi, 2002). In the overlapping contexts of the United States and YouTube, the visibility of race is a salient feature of reaction videos and the cross-cultural consumption of popular culture at large. Rather than framing this ongoing process of racialized identifications as purely fetishizing or appropriative, it is more productive to consider performative modes of authenticity in relation to self-representation and transnational identities.

Even before viewing his reaction videos, Michael Smith-Grant fixates on his articulation of Blackness, as he has not only chosen to feature himself in his thumbnail,[11] but also labels each video with the titular phrase: "Black People React to Kpop." Although Cortney and Jasmine do not take this same route, their visible bodies are still racialized by commenters who presuppose their identities based on (Western) racial ideologies (Chun, 2017). These YouTubers work within their own nationally-contextualized, racialized identities, but also participate in transnational modes of cross-racial identification that re-script assumptions about authenticity. Before pressing play on the new Big Bang music video, Michael Smith-Grant and his brother lounge in his room, chatting conversationally and lacking any noticeable artificial visual or vocalized flair. In an American setting that often scripts Black men to adhere to stereotypical hyper-masculine norms (Jackson, 2006), their casual consumption of a Korean male group packaged and sold as much more softly masculine[12] challenges normative expectations. Yet, as Michael Smith-Grant sits in front of a camera, unabashedly bobbing his head to the beat, and embodying the multiple subjectivities of a Black American male K-pop fan, there is no question that he still performs an "authentic" Blackness based on his own understanding of self and his audience's expectations.

In 2MinJinkJongKey's reaction video for BLACKPINK's "BOOMBAYAH," the two women gaze at the screen as vivid purple lights surround the four-member girl group who are dressed in dark plaid skirts and retro, loose-fitting shirts. Gasping at the bold lyrics paired with the assertion of feminine sexuality ("I don't want a boy, I need a man"), Cortney notes that "I

[11] YouTube thumbnails are often selectively constructed by individual users and edited to some degree to articulate an overall feeling of and expectation for the linked video. To actively participate and be recognized within the YouTube community, it is strategically essential for creators to use thumbnails that will attract more viewers.

[12] For more detailed descriptions of soft masculinity in the K-pop industry, see: Jung, S. (2010). *Korean masculinities and transcultural consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop idols* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.

don't want to claim her already, but I feel like I have to," referring to the common act in fandom to choose a favorite member in a particular group. When Cortney claims her "bias" in BLACKPINK, she separates herself from the commodified Other, but as she directly addresses the group members by name and eventually copies the choreography, her participation moves toward an identification where self and Other collide. Her vocalized desire to be a member of the group makes her relatable to other fans, and her admiration of and identification with members of a Korean girl group complicates simplified assumptions of race and sexuality. Cross-racial identification occurs as non-Korean fans see themselves in Korean celebrities, as exemplified by Cortney and Jasmine's continual verbalized wishes to be part of particular groups, but the reaction video can also incite this kind of identification between YouTubers and their viewers.

These reaction videos strategically juxtapose the East and West, so often discursively constructed in ideological opposition, and effectively blend cultural distinctions through visual representations of difference. While groups in the K-pop industry are made up of nearly all fair-skinned "East Asian" idols, their international fan base is noticeably more inclusive (Khiun, 2013). As these visibly non-Korean fans share their own experiences watching, celebrating, understanding, and identifying with K-pop idols, they explore dimensions of difference experienced in multiplicity, "where 'insides' and 'outsides'…cannot be clearly defined" (Shome, 2011). When JRE, Cortney and Jasmine, and Michael Smith-Grant make their visible identities a visual focal point in reaction videos, they contribute to the maintenance of transnational communities of affinity, where "alliance and affection across lines of difference…intersect both in and out of the body" (Sandoval and Davis, 2000, p. 187). Although we frequently understand fandom across racial lines as inauthentic or appropriative, here the authenticity of their identities is not put under scrutiny as reaction videos instead centralize emotional attachment and

performativity. As there can be no accurately essentialized subject, authenticity is necessarily an arbitrary signification of how one acts depending on their social location. This "acting then, is always already performative to the extent that performance, along with its deep-rooted associations with the body…illuminates the mirroring that occurs in culture, the tension between stabilizing cultural forces (tradition), and the shifting, ever-evolving aspects of culture that provides sites for social reflection, transformation, and critique" (Johnson, 2003, xxiv). Authenticity is integral not only in audiences' interpretations of one's expression of genuine feelings, but also in how one's racialized identity is perceived. These YouTubers are not White, the racial group with the most power in the United States, and are not Korean, and thus embody a fan identity that does not reify stereotypical assumptions of dominance in the transnational community.

When discussing race, an inherently embodied identity based on specifically situated experiential knowledge, it is important to consider the ways in which the globalization of media images may risk perpetuating colonialist ideals. We cannot be too overly celebratory of the "revolutionary potential" of online spaces, as racial stereotypes are still widely reified throughout the web (Guo and Harlow, 2014), and although YouTube can facilitate visual modes of resistance, these visual "truths" are in no way actually indicative of the historical complexities of race (Nakamura, 2002). That said, some scholars argue that YouTube – and, more specifically, K-pop fans who use the space for participatory contributions – does have the "re-worlding" potential for decolonization, or the "re-imaginging and restructuring of existing systems of dominance" (Ono and Kwon, 2013, p. 211).

Conclusion

Although necessarily narrow in its scope, this paper serves to demonstrate the significance of place and embodiment in reaction videos and fan identity construction and (re)presentation within spaces that are both virtual and material. This adds to ongoing interdisciplinary discussions of the global spread of the Korean Wave and the practices of its fan communities, as well as the huge surge in recent studies of YouTube as a social networking platform for creative expression and communication. The reaction video functions as a communicative practice, one which embraces performativity and the radical expression of emotion to build and sustain communities. To understand the constantly changing fluid in-between of our globalized online spaces, future research on the reaction video and fans of transnational popular culture is surely needed. And to do so, we must attend to the emotional and material aspects of our online and offline realities, considering the impact of the body on our identities and our communities.

Our embodied realities are tangled in our virtual worlds. As we continue to examine the ever-expanding realm of the transnational flows of popular culture and affective fan communities, it is crucial to consider how emotion and physicality are intertwined with online experiences. The reaction video is a creative, visual model of transnationalism that facilitates feelings of intimacy that do not adhere to typical power structures or pre-scripted modes of identification. Instead, in sharing the experience of viewing, physically distant and specifically situated fans are connected through movement and feeling. Moving forward, it will be useful to engage more directly with the international community of K-pop fans, and to understand more specifically how the intersections of their online/offline experiences impact their participation in the community. The impact of the industry does not appear to be losing traction any time soon,

and for scholars interested in communication, new media, and transnationalism, it is crucial that we keep an eye on fans' dedicated, emotional engagement with Korean popular culture.

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