

## **The Dynamics of Racial Representation in the K-pop Fan Productions** *Stephanie Jiyun Choi, University of California, Santa Barbara*

In August 2013, CJ E&M and Mnet America held a two-day K-pop convention called KCON, presenting a number of workshops, discussion panels, and concerts in Los Angeles, California. One of the discussion panels that attracted my eyes was called, “The YouTube Phenomenon: Asian American Stars,” where three Asian American YouTube personalities talked about how they began to produce YouTube videos, promoted their work, and earned profit from them. In the next year, KCON invited 74 online personalities of YouTubers, bloggers, and online media marketers out of 105 presenters. Through the panels “How To Hallyu Blog,” “All About K-pop Reaction Videos,” and “How To Reaction Video,” presenters not only promoted their blogs, YouTube channels, and themselves, but also taught the viewers how to join the vast online fandom of K-pop.

K-pop is a term that refers to “Korean popular music,” although its fans use the term in a narrower sense to describe the “idol music” genre that has gained exceptional global popularity among the youth all over the world.<sup>1</sup> Whereas K-drama was beloved by housewives from many Asian countries as part of early Korean Wave, K-pop in the late 2000s has been quickly shared by young people in their teens and twenties via social network services including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and SoundCloud. Content-wise, K-pop has a number of advantages when it is distributed in the Internet: unlike K-drama, (1) the provocative visual elements of K-pop music videos do not require in-depth understanding of Korean culture or language; (2) the short length of the content, which lasts only for 3-4 minutes, is well-suited to the youth’s volatile nature; (3) the short length of the content can be also transformed into a small size of video file, which enables easy file-sharing; and (4) the Internet drastically decreased the level of gatekeeping of domestic mass media and allowed the worldwide distribution of the Korean content.

As a means to share their thoughts on K-pop, fans began to produce their own online productions, such as cover songs and dances, reaction videos, commentaries on music videos. In the United States where race is a significant part of one’s identity, it has been important for these fans to strategically choose the way they present themselves whether textually or visually in order to promote their online productions. Indeed, the Internet is a space where gatekeeping is minimized whereas self-expression is maximized. Peter Steiner’s famous cartoon of a dog typing on a computer with the caption saying, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog,” well-represents the early myth of the invisibility of our physical appearance in the Internet. John Perry Barlow also states in “A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace” that

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice according to race, economic power, military force, or station of birth...Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are based on matter, there is no matter here. Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. (Barlow 1996)

Due to the physical absence in the online space, some believe that the Internet is a color-blind and gender-free environment. Recent studies on race in the online space, however, argue that this is a mere myth. Sarah Gatson explains that our online identities still carry our offline identities, “both those aspects we have more control over, and those we have less control over” (Jenkins 2008). Lisa Nakamura gives an

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<sup>1</sup> While the conventional classification of music genres is music-based, e.g., hip-hop, rock, and R&B, the Korean idol music is performer-based; despite the music genre they perform, once it is performed by idol singers, the music is considered “idol music.” Idol singers are all-round entertainers who are trained, produced, and managed by Korean entertainment companies.

example of online avatars that are “often constructed from a fairly narrow range of faces, bodies and features...that is generally white, conventionally physically attractive, as well as traditionally gendered, with male and female bodies extremely different in appearance” (Nakamura 2010). Remaining in a race- and gender-free environment is especially impossible for K-pop fans whose primary outlet for collective communication is YouTube. The racial purification process is rather facilitated when the YouTube viewers select and watch the videos based on the performer’s appearance on thumbnails.

In this paper, I explore the dynamics of racial representation in fan productions and interactions between these producers and their viewers. How do American K-pop fans shape, reflect, and effectively utilize their ethnic and racial identities in the online space for their affiliation to the K-pop fandom? I discuss how different communication methods—e.g., posting cover song/dance videos, posting commentary videos, and blogging—result in producing diverse racial representations and responses from their viewers and readers. I examine three cases: 1) Arlene, an Indonesian American female who performs K-pop cover songs on the Youtube channel with her brother Angky; 2) Howard and Marc from “Premium Oppa,” two of the four Asian American male YouTubers who upload commentaries on K-pop videos and Korean culture; and 3) Leaf, a married white female who uploads K-pop news and commentaries on her Google blog. The first case demonstrates how the sibling’s choice of communication method offers both limits and advantages of their representation as “Asian” to the popularity of their YouTube channels. The Premium Oppa’s case shows how their upbringing as Asian American has influenced their publicity as “Korean professionals” on their YouTube channels and how native Koreans became investigators questioning Premium Oppa as a proper mediators of Korean culture. In the last case, Leaf’s status as a white blogger allows her to be less concerned with her racial representation on her blog; instead, her neutralized racial identity channels her concern to the online exposure of herself as a “white fangirl” that may harm her social status in the offline world. The three groups’ different strategies of communication method and racial representation demonstrate how the fans imagine Korea, Asia, and the United States, and how their racial statuses are reconfigured in the realm of online K-pop fandom.

### **Arlene and Angky: The Cover Singers**

Arlene is a 21-years-old Indonesian American university student who performs as a K-pop cover singer on Youtube with her brother Angky since 2009. While many original versions of K-pop songs attract viewers with good-looking singers’ fancy dance moves, Arlene and Angky sit in front of the camera, playing either the guitar or the piano. Among the 17,000 subscribers of the sibling’s YouTube channel, many have expressed their love toward the cover songs, by commenting about the sibling’s musical talent and their poetic translation of K-pop lyrics with smooth rhymes.

Arlene explains that she loves K-pop stars because they are good-looking while humble, and most of all, she can look up to them as “proud Asians.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Asian Americans are the biggest supporters of K-pop in the United States. While Asian American fans culturally and emotionally relate themselves to the Korean culture, the visual aspects of K-pop singers attest for Asian Americans that Asians can also look “cool.”

Arlene explains that this type of contrasting image—of maintaining a humble personality while looking “cool”—again worked well for Angky’s first video, when he uploaded a K-pop cover alone. She argues that “everything is all about the first appearance”; while Angky does not fit into the “standard of beauty in America,” i.e., “white” and “tall” with “light-colored eyes, hair, and skin,” Angky’s Asian American appearance rather becomes a “shock factor” when the viewers find out his extraordinary talent in singing.<sup>3</sup> This aspect offers the fans to expect K-pop as a tool for the empowerment of Asian Americans as a minority group in the United States. Arlene states,

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<sup>2</sup> Arlene, personal interview, October 20, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

As an Asian American, I think we [Arlene and Korean singers] share more values than non-Asian American fans. Although our culture is not exactly the same, I think we both share the family-oriented, humble culture... K-pop makes me more proud to be Asian American even though I'm not Korean and I don't look like them. We're all different, but at the same time, our values are a lot more similar than the Western world. So I guess it makes me more proud to be Asian American because it's like someone who has a lot of the same values [with me] is able to do something cool.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, being a K-pop fan per se is an act of becoming a minority in the cultural territory of the United States. A number of American K-pop fans I interviewed confessed that they started online fandom activities to “not to feel alone” and to feel less “ashamed” for caring too much about K-pop. Many of them also used the term “coming out” or “outing” to refer to the (self-)disclosure of their K-pop love. Because their fan activities start from acknowledging their minority state, American K-pop fans’ goal ultimately leads to the empowerment of themselves through the effort of creating a space to share their ideas and thoughts and to express their identity through fan productions.

While Arlene expected her viewers to be primarily Americans, a number of subscribers repeatedly asked where she came from. When Arlene finally identified herself as “Indonesian,” many Indonesian viewers left comments that they were proud of the siblings: “woow so proud of you guys Indonesia (blossomxoxo)”; “hey there, so proud of you guys, I'm indonesian too^^ (Sesilia Birgitta)”; “are you Indonesian? God if yes I'm so friggin proud of you both!! (deaksjd15).”<sup>5</sup>

To both the sibling and their viewers, the YouTube channel serves as a deterritorialized space that connects two different worlds together. Although virtual, the sibling and the viewers are present in the same space and communicate instantly with each other. However, this does not necessarily imply that they speak the same language. The immediacy of the conversation in a deterritorialized space contributes to the purification of categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality, and these categories are understood differently to the sibling and the viewers. When the Indonesian viewers mention “Indonesian,” they are referring to the national category of Indonesia where the people share the same ideology, lifestyle, value, language, and culture. Meanwhile, Arlene is referring to her Indonesian American experience when she identifies herself as “Indonesian.” “Indonesian” is translated by Arlene as one of the multicultural groups in the United States that can be integrated into the racial category of “Asian” or “Asian American.”

In this sense, Arlene’s identity as Indonesian American is essentialized to “Asian” and “Indonesian” due to the incommensurability of national, ethnic, and racial categories. In the process of purification, Arlene appropriated the notion of “Korean” to connect herself with K-pop singers who are believed to share more similar cultures and values with her than Western fans. She understands “Korean” in the American racial sense, although “Korean” in K-pop refers to the national category. Again, the Indonesian viewers attempt to raise their national pride by understanding the racial sense of “Indonesian” as a national category. In the realm of international K-pop fandom, this misunderstanding and purification of race, ethnicity, and national identity serves to construct a wider, collective fan identity between Arlene and Indonesian viewers.

### **Premium Oppa: The Commentators**

Marc and Howard from Irvine also started a K-pop-related YouTube channel called “Premium Oppa” with two other Asian American friends. Marc, who is a Filipino-Jambalayan American, started listening to K-pop in 2000: “...basically being an Asian American, my brother and all of our friends got into different types of Asian music, but then K-pop was the one we stuck with.”<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Howard, as a Korean American, remembers Korea as “ghetto” and “scrappy” and K-pop singers as “kids...trying so

<sup>4</sup> Arlene, personal interview, October 20, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Angky & Arlene YouTube channel, accessed February 15, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Tiosejo, personal interview, April 12, 2014.

hard to be American” when he first travelled to Korea a decade ago. He explains that his previous impression of Korea was based on his Korean American point of view that came from the U.S. high school education:

When I grew up, in our history books in high school, there was literally one paragraph about Korea. It was basically a really stupid summary. Oh, they’ve been on China and then they’re on Japan, and then now they fought each other...They are sort of poor, and one is poor as hell. That was basically the summary of Korea back then.<sup>7</sup>

Although he hasn’t been to Korea since then, he has been educated to have “Asian pride” through online media and has learned that today’s Korea is “all about modern, sleek, clean, and very active nightlife.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the early videos posted in Premium Oppa’s channel is about a Korean food recipe that Howard demonstrates as a “Korean professional.” Due to the lack of Korean YouTube personalities in the online K-pop fandom, Howard’s ethnicity endows authenticity to his narratives on Korean culture. Howard and Marc state that ethnic and racial identity, in fact, is an important source for K-pop fans who are mostly Asians:

Howard: As an Asian, sure, you can have really friendly white friends, but in the end, you’re clearly different because the jokes come out and they don’t understand. They’ll make the Chinese accent and they think it’s funny...so it’s clear that you are the Other. And Asian is the Other. [When I hear those jokes] I want to punch them in the face so their teeth are gone...This is part of understanding Asians “as a group.”<sup>9</sup>

Marc: I think [the concept of “Asian”] is like a means of survival...I feel like the Asian guy or the woman in Hollywood and pop culture in America is stereotyped for very specific roles or purposes...Asians come together just because it’s a means of survival in America. It’s a means of familiarity. You want to hang out with people that know or have similar life experiences as yours.<sup>10</sup>

Just as Arlene and Angky were asked to identify their ethnicity, Premium Oppa also received questions from their viewers about their ethnicity. Howard says it is a common custom for Asian Americans to bring up race and ethnicity:

When you’re in Asia, you do not think of yourself as “Asian,” you think of yourself as “Korean” or “Japanese”...But your race in Asian American culture is like a call sign, it’s like your ice breaker when you’re making other Asian friends in general.<sup>11</sup>

The ethnic diversity of the team—i.e., Howard as Korean, Marc and Rueil as Filipino-Jambalayan, and David as Japanese-Chinese—well-represents the team’s identity as “Asian,” while their videos demonstrating their physical presence and fluid American English interviews with other participants in local K-pop events in Southern California attest their identity also as “American.”

While these Asian American YouTubers actively interact with their non-Korean viewers through videos and written comments, native Korean viewers intervene in the conversation as the investigators of

<sup>7</sup> Howard Lee, personal interview, April 12, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Tiosejo, personal interview, April 12, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Lee, personal interview, April 12, 2014.

Premium Oppa, the “Korean professionals.” Premium Oppa once uploaded a video of “a KPOP moment that changed your life” with a backdrop that resembled the Rising Sun Flag or the imperial Japanese flag, and a number of Korean viewers began to leave comments on the video, discussing whether the image implied the Rising Sun Flag or not. Premium Oppa had to clarify in Korean language that it was not the Flag but a meaningless glittering effect. While Howard’s status as a Korean American allows him to be a mediator of Korean culture, his eligibility is questioned by native Koreans when he does not understand the historical sensitivity of the Rising Sun Flag design. During our interview, Howard distanced himself from these Korean viewers by calling them “Korean trolls” and said, “We don’t even have subtitles so I don’t know what they’re doing.”

In Premium Oppa’s case, Marc and Howard serve as the mediators and representatives of Korean culture while maintaining their American perspective. The intervention of Korean fans creates a stratification of fandom between Korean and non-Korean viewers, by asserting the historical empathy that is missing from Howard and Marc as “Korean professionals.”

### **Leaf: The Blogger**

Leaf, a white, 32-years-old university staff member, started a K-pop blog in 2013 when she was taking care of her toddler twins. Although her family and friends knew her love for K-pop, it was hard for her to “come out,” i.e., to admit her intense involvement in the K-pop fandom, due to the “stigma that comes with active participation in ‘fandom’ . . . as a juvenile pursuit.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout our interview, Leaf continuously corrected the general idea of fangirls by stating that “not all fangirls are delusional, socially dysfunctional, basement dwellers” while viewing the sports fandom as “heteronormative, [and] as *American as apple pie*.”<sup>13</sup>

While football is considered masculine, heteronormative, and thus is legitimized as an “American” activity in the mainstream America, Leaf, as a white female, falls into a minority status in the American K-pop fandom where the majority of fans are Asian Americans. As a result, Leaf experiences a different situation from Arlene or Premium Oppa. While Arlene’s and Premium Oppa’s Asian roots legitimize their taste in K-pop as “Asian” pop, it becomes queer to Leaf whose family and friends are mostly white. As Yen Le Espiritu explains, “femininity is a relational category, one that is co-constructed with other racial and cultural categories” (Espiritu 2001: 416). Leaf states that she feels like she stands out as “a crazy white girl K-pop fan” in K-pop concerts where the majority of the audience is Asian Americans.

Despite her minority status in the offline world, Leaf does not feel odd to be in the online fandom, because “[she knows that she’s] among friends.”<sup>14</sup> By “friends” she is not referring to acquainted people but to the “huge body of mixed races and ethnicities all united by K-pop.”<sup>15</sup> Whereas Asian Americans conceive of the K-pop fandom “as a group” and share the idea of “Asian” in their mind, Leaf does not project the idea of “Asian pop” or “Asianness” to K-pop. She appreciates K-pop as a global phenomenon that is celebrated by multiracial groups; by doing so, her whiteness can be normalized within the American fandom of K-pop. To Leaf, fandom as an imagined community trumps racial identity:

Discovering Hallyu has been an absolutely delightful experience and has been felt like a homecoming. I’m not Korean, what is wrong with me? . . . But clearly, I’m not alone in this, as there are folks all over the globe from Latin America to Sweden to Malaysia who dig this crazy Korean jive.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Leaf, Facebook chat interview, September 22, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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As an effort to countervail the “crazy white fangirl” identity, Leaf attempts to stress her professionalism in both her career and fandom. To Leaf, stressing professionalism is an act of neutralizing her sexuality.<sup>17</sup> During her high school and college years, Leaf wore a lot of men’s clothing as she did not want her “sex/gender to interfere with people’s perception of [her] competence” regarding her work.<sup>18</sup> Her perspective on masculinity as competent and professional and femininity as incompetent and amateur continues to affect her status in the K-pop fandom between a “fangirl” and a “K-pop professional.” During our interview, she continued to stress her full-time job as her partial identity as a K-pop fan by calling herself a “working mom” and by stating what other academic projects she can do to develop the K-pop literature and how she can engage in the K-pop fandom as an academic professional. She also mentioned her plan to develop her blogger status into a professional one: “Having a press pass [in K-pop events] would eliminate those concerns because attending as a journalist legitimizes my interest in this culture that is totally foreign from my own.”<sup>19</sup>

Blogging is thus the most effective way for Leaf to secure her racially- and sexually-minority status while exhibiting her academic knowledge in the online space. Although she acknowledges her race and gender in her blog posts, she does not necessarily have to display her physical appearance on her blog. Meanwhile, articulating her thoughts via text allows her to demonstrate and archive her critiques and analyses on K-pop.

### **Conclusion**

The cases of Arlene and Angky, the Premium Oppa, and Leaf show K-pop fan activities as a social practice keenly related to the fans’ national, ethnic, racial, and gender identities. Each producer’s different communication methods protect and enhance their message of empowerment regarding their offline status while they all culminate in the identity formation of K-pop fandom. Meanwhile, the online space as a deterritorialized place complicates the producers’ online representation, as Indonesian Americans, Indonesians, Korean Americans, Koreans, and white Americans meet altogether in the online space and imagine different Koreas, Asias, and United States.

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<sup>17</sup> While Leaf struggles with her racialized sexuality, Arlene’s and Premium Oppa’s cases show that their racial identity trumps over sexuality. Because their suppressed racial status is celebrated in the space of online fandom, there is no space for sexuality to be mentioned and discussed.

<sup>18</sup> Leaf, Facebook chat interview, September 22, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Leaf, Facebook chat interview, September 22, 2014.

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