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**Transcultural Media and the Soft Power of the Korean Wave:
A Reversed Ethnographic Approach to U.S. Fans' Reception of Korean
Popular Culture**

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Dedication

To God, my families, and the loved ones

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I dedicate my dissertation to God, my families, and the loved ones. I would not be where I am now without the endless support and love from my family: Mom, dad, and my older brother. I love you from the bottom of my heart. I also would like to express my sincere gratitude for Dr. Joe Straubhaar and Dr. Tom Johnson for their continuous help and guidance on my dissertation. My beloved friends in Korea and the US: Thank you for always being there for me. My dearest informants: You have given me countless ideas, challenged me, and most of all, shown me the values I was not aware of. Salloong: Your love and understanding have made me go through even the darkest and toughest days. You are the sunshine and the apple of my eye. I am grateful for a lot of things, and I hope my journey to better understand communication in pursuit of social betterment does not stop here.

**Transcultural Media and the Soft Power of the Korean Wave:
A Reversed Ethnographic Approach to U.S. Fans' Reception of Korean
Popular Culture**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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This dissertation unravels dynamic interactions between Korean popular culture and its fans in the United States, how cultural hybridity of the Korean Wave un/consciously facilitates soft power, and what sociocultural implications it might yield in global/international contexts. Employing various theoretical frameworks of globalization, critical/cultural media studies, hybridity, soft power, and fan studies, I conduct a qualitative methodological approach of what I call “reversed media ethnography”—examining the contraflow of Korean media culture—on U.S. fans. I employ various qualitative and interpretive techniques including grounded theory to analyze the rich corpus of data—participant observation and qualitative interviews—I collected over a period of two years to examine the nature of transcultural media and fans of the Korean Wave in the United States.

Overall, the findings of this dissertation suggest that the complex layers of hybridity embedded in Korean popular culture creates complicated webs of transculturality, such as alternative forms of gender representation, cute culture, and honorific culture. When popular culture is circulated transnationally, the local context of its origin is often erased and instead it is projected through the lens of the receiving local

context. Understanding transcultural media texts—K-pop’s appropriation of Hip Hop—as well as the perception of ethnicity surrounding the practice is bound to have differences and difficulties based on varying degrees of social and historical contexts. Cultural appropriation can enhance diversity and multiculturalism, however, one should be sensitive to a culture that has a history of being colonized or oppressed. I suggest a mutual understanding of each other’s culture and history in order to appreciate and respect the Otherness of each culture as well as subcultures.

Global social media, as a main conduit to interact with foreign cultures, facilitates the spread and popularity of Korean popular culture, yet simultaneously creates cross-cultural misunderstanding and disjunctures. The Korean Wave exemplifies strategically well-balanced cultural hybridity that arouses a certain feeling of affinity—what I call emotional proximity. Korean popular culture evokes continuous negotiations of identities and generates nonthreatening wholesome content that comfortably appeals to American fans with varying degrees of ethnic, racial, social, and cultural backgrounds. The notion of *woori-ness* (we-ness in English)—collective unity and solidarity—embedded in Korean popular culture and its fandom culture works as one of the multifaceted soft power in the eyes of U.S. fans that leads to an alternative post-Western soft power. This study contends that it is not the so-called hybridized Korean popular culture per se that makes it transcultural—and global to some extent—but the often under-recognized vital agents in the global sphere: the regions of fans.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Are you the one about soft power?” she said, seemed to have read my online profile about being a researcher interested in soft power and excited to have me as a new member of a group. A group of people was gathered in a dimly lit room to watch a Korean TV drama together. Some of them were wearing a T-shirt with K-pop (Korean pop music) written on it, and one of them had an *EXO*¹ keychain. It was early 2015 when I first met them who enjoy consuming and interacting with Korean popular culture in the US. That was the moment my journey to a reversed ethnographic approach to U.S. fans’ reception of Korean popular culture started.

With the development of digital technologies along with the rapid globalization process in the 1990s, there has been a surge of transnational cultural flow of South Korean media content in the domain of global media culture. South Korea (hereafter Korea)’s media market expansion facilitated the export of its popular culture, which has received worldwide attention and popularity. Rigorously supported by the Korean government and entrepreneurs as an official national policy, productions and content of Korean popular culture, mainly television drama (K-drama) and pop music (K-pop), have become a giant cultural industry, and have been widely consumed by and enchanted other countries (KOCIS, 2012; Shim, 2006). This successful reception of Korean popular culture overseas is known as the Korean Wave (or *Hallyu* in Korean).

The globalization paradigm (Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 2002; Kraidy, 2002; Shim, 2006; Straubhaar, 1991; Tomlinson, 1999), as opposed to imperialist theses (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Schiller, 1970; 1976; 1991), provides more flexible and complex theoretical accounts, which help to explicate the dynamic consequences derived by

¹ EXO is one of the most popular K-pop groups.

technological developments and the prominent emergence of hitherto *non-center*² and so-called non-dominant-Western countries as major cultural producers and exporters. In the midst of an increasingly complex interdependence among countries in international settings, the flow of media culture, particularly popular culture, has become more multipolar (having different centers of power in a world) and multidirectional (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Straubhaar, 1991).

A handful of previous studies (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Jung & Shim, 2014; Kim, 2009a; Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006; Yang, 2012a) looked at how individuals in different countries, primarily in Asia, engage with the Korean Wave, which has become a regional global culture. However, very few investigations have explored it empirically with first-hand accounts in Western contexts, particularly the United States. This is mainly because the reverse cultural flow from the Asian sphere to the Western sphere has been relatively limited (Iwabuchi, 2002), at least until now, which led most Korean Wave scholars to focus only on the analysis of intraregional cultural flows within the Asian/Pacific region. However, the increasing prominence of the Korean Wave, especially K-pop among the young digital generation in the United States, compels scholars to reexamine the phenomenon much further.

According to Zubernis and Larsen (2012), we are hardly immune to the pleasures of the fan object and yet there remains a level of shame attached to the notion of being a fan, particularly if one is female. Scholars with intentions to explore fandom studies have often met with trepidation and numerous declarations that fandom is little more than the realm of ‘Japanese otakus (obsessive fans)’ and ‘Western fangirls,’ and thus, by extension, emotional and uncontrollable. Furthermore, this hegemonic perspective

² In the realm of global cultural studies, “non-center” refers to countries that are not traditionally considered as powerful in international settings.

implies that consideration of the U.S. fans of the Korean Wave phenomenon from a fan cultural perspective taints the seriousness of transcultural critical cultural studies, depoliticizing it to an unacceptable degree. This shame extends to acafan (academics who self-identifies as a fan of, usually, popular culture) subjectivity, compelling them to apologize for attempting to engage intellectually with a subject matter that is seen to be trivial and frivolous. “We theorise and politicize our pleasures in order to make them more palatable to a cultural elite that does not need any more encouragement to dismiss what we study as frivolous and meaningless. The very act of justification is of course an indication that we are uncomfortable with the position” (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012, p. 46).

It is in this vein that I use the term ‘fan’ instead of ‘audience’ throughout my dissertation. One of the traits that distinguish fans from general audiences is the level of investment—how much one is willing to invest (Bourdieu, 1984). The level of investment—the level of fandom—the people I have interacted with and studied are much deeper and richer than general audiences to an extent that they become the participants of the whole ecology of transcultural media and fandom. Instead of just viewing and consuming media texts, some of them create their own content, learn the language, and even move to Korea to live. My dissertation employs what I call a *reversed* media ethnographic approach to examine multiple aspects of the Korean Wave as transcultural media and its fans in the United States. In other words, in addition to examining the contraflow of media culture, having an outsider scholar like myself, from a country that had been more peripheral, study the impact of its cultural exports on people in one of the central countries like the United States. This reverses the usual dynamic in which scholars from central countries study the periphery, hence *reversed* media ethnography. I have closely participated and interacted with American fans of the Korean

Wave for more than two years to explore beyond what has already been studied and below the surface of their expressed interpretations.

My reversed media ethnography over a period of two years includes participant observations and various structures and types of interview methods. Between early 2015 and early 2017, I regularly engaged in qualitative interviews and participatory observation of meetings, events, and activities that are related to Korean popular culture. These events and activities are organized and held by a local group called a *Korean Interest Group* (a pseudonym, hereafter KIG) in Texas. There are about 14 key informants with whom I have closely interacted on a regular basis and conducted in-depth qualitative interviews periodically for the past two years. The rich corpus of data includes both citations from my field notes on participatory observations and quotes from interviews. I do not attempt to provide generalizations about American fans' reception of Korean popular culture. But rather, by providing an in-depth, fragmented moment of the whole ecology, I attempt to provide unexpected discoveries through detailed analyses and possible conceptualizations of recurring patterns, a major strength of qualitative media ethnographic research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

I revisit some of the relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks of globalization in light of the Korean Wave in order to address the following inquiries: What motivates Americans to interact with Korean popular culture? What are the cross-cultural similarities and differences they see in Korean popular culture versus American popular culture? How do they consume, interpret, and reproduce—encode/decode—with Korean popular culture? What aspects of soft power can be found within American fans' reception of Korean popular culture? What implications does Korean Wave's soft power have on American fans' identity? How does cultural hybridity of Korean popular culture un/consciously facilitate socio-political implications of soft power in the United States,

which has one of the strongest cultural industries in the world? And what cultural, social, and political implications does the Korean Wave yield in global/international contexts?

The theoretical approach of cultural hybridity to the Korean Wave phenomenon has undermined the multiple processes and practices international fans generate (Anderson & Shim, 2015). Hybridity should not be used as an easy tool to explain any national, regional, international, or global media culture; its complicated in-between space is never power-neutral but demands constant struggles and negotiations over cultural meanings and symbols. The theoretical challenge of hybridity lies in what context transnational hybridity creates ideological twists in global contexts and fulfills (or does not) its progressive potential in a local context (Kraidy, 2002). It is important to remark that although soft power can only be made possible with substantial hard economic power and the political economic aspect of the Korean Wave should not be undermined. Yet, spread of and exposure to foreign popular culture does not always guarantee its popularity overseas (Shim, 2013). The transnational and transcultural reception of media texts is neither fully controllable nor predictable by media producers and policymakers because media texts are never self-sufficient structures of meanings themselves.

I argue that the intricate layers of hybridity well manifested in Korean popular culture is not just a mere influence on U.S. fans of the Korean Wave, but a part of the creation of the ecology of transcultural media and fandom. This is where the soft power of the Korean Wave, as an alternative post-Western soft power in international settings, comes in: Korea's *woori-ness* (we-ness in English, which signifies a sense of unity and collective mindset), a significant yet under-recognized facet of soft power, and its historical position of in-between 'semi-periphery' to the power structure in the world. One of the purposes for studying the reception of the Korean Wave among fans in the

United States is not to impose the idea of the great soft power of Korean-ness as a neo-colonial global cultural power, but to reexamine globalization theories that recognize the dynamic formations of identity and hybridity at the local level while not dismissing the power hierarchy in international settings. As Oh (2017) suggests, I attempt to direct our attention not so much to how to preserve the Korean Wave, but how the movement of Korean Wave across global circuits can contribute to the hybridity that helps to level global power.

I consider pertinent arguments—globalization, hybridity, popular culture, identity, transcultural fan studies—as pieces of a broader theoretical argument and recognize their aggregate power in the hope that we can better understand the complex webs of international communication and global/transnational media culture, albeit provisional. One of the ways to do so is when we start to take fans’ reception of transcultural popular culture more seriously, and closely interact with them with a trans-local ethnographic approach at the heart of globalization. The structure and format of my dissertation is fluid as is the nature of cultural studies’ way of writing. I will first examine contexts relevant to the cultural industry in Korea and historical formation of the Korean Wave. In the next chapter, I will examine theoretical concepts and previous research in the realms of globalization, hybridity, soft power, popular culture, and fan studies. Next, I will elaborate on methodology, findings, and conclusion, respectively. However, my arguments on theoretical concepts and ideas would be elaborated throughout the dissertation in a more fluid and flexible structure to explicate multiple aspects of transcultural media and fans of the Korean Wave in the United States.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

1. THE KOREAN WAVE IN GLOBALIZATION

1.1. Cultural Industry in Korea

Scholars of the globalization theories argue that the composition, the global flow and the audience's use of media products are far more complex than Lerner's, Schiller's and Boyd-Barrett's naïve argument of cultural imperialism. The core characteristic of globalization theories thus lies in the "necessary complexity" (Sparks, 2007, p. 130). Appadurai (1996) supports this notion by stating that there is no undefeatable single leader of a world system of images, but instead the world system is consisted of multiple nodes of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes. In the midst of these arguments, the unexpected emergence of the Korean Wave (or *Hallyu* in Korean) since the 1990s serves as a good example of the often unpredictable and unsymmetrical transnational flows of media culture (Shim, 2006). The Korean Wave denotes not Korean popular culture per se, but the popularity of Korean popular culture in non-Korean territories.

It was not long ago that Korea started to emerge as one of the major centers for the production of transnational popular culture. Since the 1990s, the Korean cultural industries have developed many of their cultural products and expanded the export of these products to mainly East and Southeast Asia. The sudden rise of Korean popular culture and its dissemination in Asian countries took many people in Asia by surprise, as foreign or transnational popular culture in Asia had often been associated with the United States, Japan or Hong Kong (Kim, 2013). A few media outlets and scholars argued that

the Korean Wave is a passing fad due to both protective cultural policies in some Asian countries and the emergence of China and India as new powerhouses in the realm of popular culture (Jin, 2016). However, despite these concerns, the Korean Wave has further developed from a regional reception to that of a global, albeit not yet full-fledged. Many policy makers, cultural practitioners, media scholars, and most of all, popular culture fans around the world are amazed by this unexpected global popularity of Korean popular culture originating from the small, once semi-peripheral, country.

The spread of the Korean Wave can be categorized roughly into two major historical developments: the Korean Wave 1.0 era between 1997 and 2007 and the Korean Wave 2.0 era since 2008 to the present (Jin, 2016). They differ in their major characteristics, such as major cultural exports, technological developments, fan bases and government's cultural policies.

	Korean Wave 1.0	Korean Wave 2.0
Time Period	1997-2007	2008-present
Primary Genres	TV dramas, films	K-pop, video games, animation
Technologies	Online games	Social media, digital games
Major Regions	East Asia	Asia, Europe, North America, South America
Primary Fans	30s-40s	Teens-20s included
Major Cultural Policies	Governments' hands-off neoliberal policies	Governments' hands-on policies mixed with neoliberal policies

Table1: Two Major Time Periods of the Korean Wave (Note: Reprinted from Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave*. University of Illinois Press: 2016)

There are several reasons to demarcate the Korean Wave into these two time periods. First, the trend in the global cultural trade for the Korean cultural industries has changed since 2008, when the export of cultural products surpassed those of imported products. Second, Korea has become one of the top non-Western countries that meaningfully exports almost all of its cultural forms (Jin, 2016), such as television programs, film, popular music, animation, digital technologies including online gaming and smartphones—not only as technology but also as culture—to both Western and non-Western countries. There have been several countries that have penetrated the global markets with their cultural products, but they primarily export limited cultural forms. For

example, Mexico and Brazil have exported television programs, known as *telenovelas*, Hong Kong was famous for its Kung-Fu movies in the 1970s and 1980s, and Japan has been a global leader with its *manga* (comic books) and animation. However, Japan's popular music and television programs have not been well received in the Western markets, albeit successful in the Asian region. The contemporary global presence of diverse Korean cultural forms cannot be seen with other non-Western countries (Jin, 2016).

Third is perhaps one of the most significant aspects when considering the Korean Wave: political economic perspective. Government policy has shifted from hands-off, indirect support, intervention, and deregulation to the global trade of cultural products in the early years of the Korean Wave 1.0 to hands-on, direct support in the new era of the Korean Wave as a result of changing political ideologies and political relations to other countries. The successful growth of Korean cultural industries and their expansion overseas has been closely linked to the government's cultural policies, either directly or indirectly in the midst of neo-liberal reform. The Korean government has cultivated its cultural policies in the face of globalization, such as export promotion, direct and indirect export subsidies and supports, and the promotion of the nation's cultural image abroad (Jin, 2014).

Since 2008, the latest two administrations of *Lee Myung-bak* (2008-2013) and *Park Geun-hye* (2013-2017) have changed their emphasis on cultural policy toward a creative content policy and have begun to be actively involved in the cultural sector. They have focused on the creative industries, previously known as the cultural industries,

as a significant part of the national economy, with one of the emphases on intellectual properties. The Lee administration (2008-2013) actively supported and controlled the Korean contents industries followed by the Park administration (2013-2017) that has continued and even intensified its hands-on policy in the cultural sector. The Park administration allocated 2 percent of the national budget to culture, up from 0.9 percent in 2010 when the average budget for OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries was 1.9 percent during the same period (Presidential Transition Team, 2013). In the era of Korean Wave 2, the last two governments have taken a distinctive position in the sector of cultural industries. They attempted to deal with almost every cultural sector in the midst of the rapid growth of digital/social media in the name of national economy. Since 2010, the cultural penetration of Korean popular culture, including online gaming and K-pop, has exponentially increased across the globe when the government initiated a systematic export strategy that works closely with private firms and cultural industries.

The premise of globalization is that the power of nation-states have diminished in the realm of economy and culture, and the national boundary does not function to shape people's cultural identities and cultural sovereignty. However, as explicated in the Korean Wave case, the power of the nation-state does is reformed and redeveloped through the government's engagement in international relations. While neoliberal norms call for small involvement of government in the cultural sector, the Korean government has taken a major role because the cultural industries acknowledge that active governmental intervention is needed to grow as commodities. Under neo-liberal reform,

the primary role of the Korean government has been somewhat decreased, however, the nation-state remains and intensifies its role in popular culture (Jin, 2014).

Fourth, the advance of social media and digital technologies has changed the trend of the Korean Wave, making it much more global and transcultural both in scope and scale. The new media such as social media are a vital element creating an unfathomable spread of information in both speed and scope, known as spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Jin & Yoon, 2014). Fans around the world heavily access social media to enjoy K-pop, K-drama, television programs, films, and Korea-based-video-and-smartphone games rather than via traditional one-way communication technologies and mainstream media (Jin, 2012). The scope and scale of fans (rather than general audiences) and their participatory activities across the globe have exponentially increased for the Korean Wave 2.0. One noticeable example is K-pop. As Psy's "Gangnam Style," featuring a buffoonish horse dance, has been the most watched video on YouTube in the world since 2013, social media has been a powerful conduit for Korean Wave, facilitating their popularity beyond the Asian region. This implies that the Korean Wave 2.0 has been made possible because Korea has advanced its digital technologies in conjunction with social media (Jin, 2014).

Around the world, transcultural fans are increasingly assessing foreign popular cultural content through social media. Since the early 2010s, K-pop, considered as the strongest element of the Korean Wave 2.0, and its music videos have garnered a massive fan base worldwide through its skillfully hybridized form. K-pop fans around the world have transculturally collaborated together and circulated K-pop-related content through

social media such as Facebook and Twitter. For example, regional fans of K-pop in Indonesia have been identified as the major contributor in ranking *Super Junior*, a K-pop idol group, as the number one worldwide trending topic on Twitter in October 2010 (Jung, 2011a). Worldwide K-pop phenomenon illustrates how social media empower transcultural fandoms, enhance cultural flow, and affect the dynamics of transcultural circulation (Jung, 2011a). Nevertheless, it is important to address that the transcultural phenomenon of the Korean Wave is boosted in conjunction with political economic strategy, such as the Korean government purposefully relaxing copyright issues in order to make the content of Korean popular culture more accessible and spreadable.

It is hard to define what K-pop is due to some regarding it as a larger world rather than just a musical genre of popular culture (Y. Kim, 2015). In this dissertation, I use the term K-pop to refer to those systematically trained idols and their music that often emphasize on their choreography-driven performance. K-pop's emphasis on performers' aesthetically pleasing attractiveness and versatility are some of the elements that have attracted worldwide fandoms (Lie, 2012; Oh, 2015). For instance, the increasing presence of K-pop in the United States, a country with the world's largest music market, is evidenced by the fact that the *Billboard* has been providing its own section dedicated to K-pop since 2011 and YouTube provides a category solely dedicated to K-pop (Song, 2015). More recently, a K-pop boy group called BTS (*BangTan Sonyeondan*, meaning bulletproof boy scout) won the Top Social Artist Award at Billboard Music Awards on May 21st, 2017, receiving more than 300 million votes, which broke the world record for having the most votes in a fan-voted award at the Billboard Music Awards.

The Korean Wave phenomenon provides a unique case study because of the ways in which it has achieved its own mode of cultural hybridity, modernity, and most importantly, international fans' active role in the era of social media. The Korean Wave is more than just popular culture because of its entertainment-diplomatic complexity³ (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015), a national-institutional policy initiative with clear ambitions reaching beyond the cultural domain (Choi, 2015), and most of all, its appeal to widely varying degrees of audiences and fans across the globe.

1.2. Media Culture from Transnational to Transcultural

Increasingly complex interdependences among countries and the development of technologies have signaled the demise of the cultural imperialism theses and elicited substantial attention for multilayered transnational media culture in a postcolonial context. In contrast to the imperialism theories, the globalization paradigm views media culture as more dynamic, multilayered, multi-polar and multi-central in which the key distinctive characteristic of the contemporary global world from earlier periods lies in this “necessary complexity” (Sparks, 2007, p. 130).

Globalization is often tied up with modernity. Many would agree with the proposition that if globalization means anything, it means the incorporation of societies into a capitalist modernity (Sparks, 2007). But they differ as to what that entails. Whereas Giddens (1990) and Appadurai (1996) viewed globalization as constituted in and through the spread of modernity, Robertson (1992) saw it as a distinctive process from modernity. Tomlinson (2003) saw globalization as engendering cultural identity, instead of

³For example, people often refer to K-pop idols as the most treasured ‘national assets’

destroying nation-states and homogenizing (Americanizing) the entire world, as we live through publicly institutionalized and discursively organized world. “Globalization is really the globalization of modernity, and modernity is the harbinger of identity” (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 271). Modernity is the harbinger of identity, not destroyer, because it institutionalizes and regulates cultural practices (e.g., gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, various capitals, etc.). Also, deterritorialization, enabled by communication technologies, is not destroying localities and demolishing traditions. Tomlinson (2003) rather views cultural experience as being expanded in various ways out of its traditional particular localities.

Our places are increasingly penetrated both in tangible and intangible ways by the connectivity of globalization, and location becomes less of an issue in modern culture. We mundanely experience global media via the Internet and social media: Enabling ‘action(s) at a distance’ (Giddens, 1990) and creating imagined communities that share experiences/memories in a ‘deterritorialized mediascape’ (Appadurai, 1991). All nation-states now seek to govern populations whose identities are multilayered and complex. This does not mean the waning significance of identification with the nation because they are not mutually exclusive. It suggests that national identity is experienced in multiple ways in the era of globalization (Tomlinson, 2003).

On the other hand, Marxist-inspired scholars view globalization as the spread of the capitalist world market. This perspective looks at ‘society’ as the unit of analysis (Nederveen Pieterse, 1987), equating globalization with Western modernization. Nederveen Pieterse (1994) understands globalization as hybridization: Emergence of new

mixed forms and structures. Globalization is inherently fluid, indeterminate and open-ended. One of the problems of associating globalization with Western modernization—a powerful ideology—lies in its implication that the history of globalization begins with the history of the West. This replicates all the problems associated with Euro-centrism, and casts a narrow window on the world historically and culturally. Schiller (1989)’s notion of global synchronization overlooks the countercurrents; the impact non-Western cultures have been making on the West; ignores the reality of the local reception of Western culture; fails to see the influence non-Western cultures have been exercising on one another; overlooks the fact that many of the exports by the West and its cultural industries themselves are hybridized and have been strongly influenced by the Oriental cultures (Wong, 2010). If we examine their cultural lineages, they are hybridized forms of various cultural mixtures. European and Western culture are part of this global *mélange* (Nederveen Pieterse, 2015); this is obvious if we recognize that Europe was frequently the recipient of cultural influences from the Orient until the 14th century. The hegemony of the West traces back to only a very recent time from 1800 to industrialization (Nederveen Pieterse, 2015; Said, 1978).

The term transnational is commonly used to describe a condition “by which people, commodities and ideas literally cross and transgress national boundaries and are not identified with a single place of origin” (Watson, 2006, p. 11), which is facilitated by globalization processes. Transnational media culture engenders an unpredictable, fluid and creative form of hybridization (Shim, 2006). Most forms of culture in the world today are, to varying extents, hybrid in which different values, beliefs and practices have

become deeply entwined. “Globalization essentially is hybridity” (Straubhaar, 2007, p. 32) and “It is clear that hybridization is an inevitable course for all cultures” (Kraidy, 1999, p. 459). In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) argues that, “the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable” (p. 55). Claiming pure authenticity in modern popular culture is problematic because it justifies a certain group’s appropriation of other culture as guaranteed and legitimizes those who get to define one’s cultural authenticity. Global capitalism infused with white imperialism has naturalized its cultural dominance and privilege under the disguise of authenticity (Manning 2004; Oh, 2014). U.S. popular culture has been highly influenced by Oriental cultures, yet their authenticities are rarely criticized (Wong, 2010). Oh (2014; 2015b) argued that it is the whitened industry of US popular culture that preserves white authenticity regardless of their own hybridity, while stigmatizing others’ appropriation as simply bad mimicry. Although the colonizer’s imperial gaze does not simply deny the Others, they always believe in only *one* culture (Savigliano, 1995).

Some U.S. viewers perceive K-pop and its performers’ hybridity as a “bad copy” of U.S. pop (Poole, 2013; Yang, 2012b). This perspective is problematic because of the ways they claim an authenticity to U.S. culture, and it leads us to consider who defines one’s cultural authenticity. Considering the whitened U.S. pop industry that freely appropriates other ethnic cultures, the success of Korean singer Psy and his song “Gangnam Style” in 2012 is worth looking at, given his stereotypical bodily representation as an Asian male. Despite the fact that Psy’s chubby body and round face do not look like any of the other extremely well-groomed, aesthetically pleasing K-pop

idols, some U.S. viewers cheered him because of his “authentic” Korean-ness (Pan, 2012).

The U.S. viewers’ accusation of K-pop and its performers’ hybridity as mimicry unveils how the hierarchical racial politics of a country like the US has constructed one’s cultural in/authenticity. According to Oh (2014; 2015b), hybridity in K-pop is neither a postcolonial mimicry nor a bad imitation because for one reason, Korea, with its more than 5,000-year-long history, does not share the racial politics constructed in the United States. If the origin—White authenticity—is construed to disguise the hegemony of White supremacy, then mimicry cannot exist because the term “mimicry” assumes there is an absolute authentic origin. K-pop’s hybridity is not a postcolonial mimicry as that mimicry is only made possible in opposition to the existence of true authenticity. Authenticity is culturally and racially created and constructed to justify the racial hierarchy that has been historically embedded in various sectors of our society since the colonial era (Oh, 2014). The notion of cultural authenticity has been a constructed myth that exclusively legitimizes the racially “unmarked” privilege of White people and their appropriation of others (Phelan, 1993). According to Dyer (1997), the cultural construction of whiteness is the unmarked category (marking others), the unexamined category (subjecting others to examination), and the norm (making others insufficient), the cumulative effect of which is privilege (and disadvantage for others). Chambers (1997, p. 189) adds that although “there are plenty of unmarked categories (male-ness, heterosexuality, and middle class-ness being obvious ones),” it can be argued that “whiteness is perhaps the primary unmarked and so unexamined—let’s say ‘blank’—category.”

On the other aspect of this debate, there is the notion of cultural appropriation. Some of the K-pop performers selectively *appropriate* Hip Hop and Black culture from the US in their musical production and styles. The way they appropriate and present Hip Hop and Black culture sometimes prompts a great level of outrage among international, especially Black/African American, audiences and K-pop fans (Seoulbeats, 2013). Whether a certain cultural form—in this case, K-pop—is postcolonial mimicry or cultural hybridity lies in the eye of the beholder, which is un/consciously and in/evitably political (Phelan, 1993). Understanding cultural appropriation as well as the perception of ethnicity surrounding the practice (Lipstiz, 1998) is bound to have differences based on sociohistorical context. When popular culture is circulated transnationally, the local context of its origin is often erased and instead projected through the lens of a receiving local context. The discourse around K-pop’s appropriation of Hip Hop and Black culture has two sides. On one hand, the fact that K-pop performers have U.S. influenced music styles does not necessarily mean that they are knowledgeable about the history of African American slavery, racial politics, or representational issues in the US. On the other hand, given the rising global cultural influence of K-pop around the world, the K-pop performers may need to consider the increasingly diverse communities on the receiving end: the international audiences and fans. As I analyze later in the Findings Chapter, racialized perception often limits the readability of hybridity embedded in K-pop. I attempt to suggest a different discourse to both sides of the arguments, which emphasizes a practice of mutual responsibility and reciprocal sensitivity to other cultures in this global era.

The transnational circulation of other cultures such as hybridized K-pop challenges the long-held binary representation system in the United States. By systematically denying agency and stigmatizing others as being inauthentic which eventually facilitated imperialism, white imperialists have secured its own “pure” authenticity and “neutral” normativity while freely appropriating the sources of all Otherness. Claiming pure cultural authenticity, whether of White or Black U.S. authenticity, as if it is an inherently fixed term is asserting imagined superiority and reinforcing exoticization of “Others” (Said, 1978). The logic of this argument grants one to have a right to claim authorship over popular cultures that should be considered as fluid elements, reflecting the inevitably multidirectional flows of hybridized cultural contexts in contemporary society. Cultural signifiers or symbols can be interpreted differently depending on the varying contexts of culture, history, and society (Ang, 1996; Fiske, 2011; Hall, 1998; Oh, 2015b). Viewing the hybridized images and representations of K-pop and Korean popular culture as “honorary White” is likely—not always—derived from projecting America’s own histories and perspectives onto the Korean identity and bodily representation, conflating them with Asian American or their identity as Korean is invisible from the gaze of American mindset.

Few analyses have focused on texts produced outside but consumed inside the United States, except for some that focus on U.S. fans of Japanese anime (Jenkins, 2006; Napier, 2016). Even fewer have considered the significance of fan culture on an increasingly global scene, fostered particularly by the advent of the Internet as a tool for intercultural, and potentially global fan activity (Darling-Wolf, 2004). Border-crossing—

transcultural—fan studies have often been relegated to the periphery of fandom studies because scholars have tended to prioritize the nation when understanding fan appropriation and engagement and/or effectively exoticising transcultural fandoms. In this way, the unique insights they offer about the ways that transcultural fans interpret and interact with both media and one another in an ever-intensifying global media market is limited (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Questions of both how and why different transcultural media capture the imaginations of fans, as well as how fans incorporate transcultural media into their own popular cultural contexts and what meanings they attribute to them, have the potential to contribute nuance to a discipline that has remained firmly White American in orientation.

Thus, I advocate a broad framework for the exploration and interrogation of transcultural and transnational fandoms in which the nation is a one facet of contexts that influence their rise and spread. I argue that while national identity and transnational historical and sociopolitical contexts may inform fans' pursuits, this is neither necessarily the case nor the only possible mode of transcultural fan engagement. As Chin and Morimoto (2013) argued, I prefer the term 'transcultural' instead of 'transnational' as the latter implicitly prioritizes a national orientation over other subject positions that are arguably more salient. The term 'transcultural' on the other hand is more flexible enough to allow for a national orientation, yet leaves open the possibility of other orientations such as gender, sexual, popular, and fan cultural contexts within the ecology of media fandom. My contention is that this approach provides a better conduit to comprehend how and why fandoms arise almost regardless of national borders both geographical and

cultural.

1.3. Hybridity

Among numerous theories and frameworks in globalization research, cultural hybridity or hybridization has been most frequently associated with explaining the Korean Wave phenomenon (Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006). It investigates power relations between the center and the periphery from the postcolonial perspective, and scholars have employed hybridity in postcolonial contexts to explicate various phenomena of transnational media culture, both in the non-West and the West (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Kraidy, 2002; Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006; Shome & Hedge, 2002; Young, 1995). According to dependency theory, media play an ideological role as part of the cultural superstructure that results from the economic relations of dependency. In this pattern, the peripheral or Third World countries depend on the central or First World countries for capital, technology and most manufactured goods (Hamelink, 1983; Straubhaar, 1991).

While this center-periphery binary relation can be influential, this logic is limited when explaining the Korean Wave phenomenon in a global/international context for its reductionist approach to view Korea as a producer that is neither part of the *traditional* world centers nor peripheral, and also individual fans' participatory practices. Bhabha (1994) argues that hybridity should not be understood as the denial or contradiction of identity, but rather that its core function is always mixed, relational, inventive and negotiable. Hybridized media culture invites people into a distinctive location that is neither an authentic locality nor power-neutral. Therefore, hybridization is neither merely

imitating different elements that ultimately form a culture-less identity, nor simply aggregating differences. Rather, the hybridized media culture marks the continuous negotiation of various discourses and identity among producers and individual audience members.

In a political perspective, Kraidy (2002) considers hybridity as a space where practices are continuously negotiated and resistant to domination. However, hybridity and domination are not mutually exclusive. In other words, there is power inequality and struggle within hybridity. We need to understand hybridity not as a descriptive tool but as a practice for it allows us to recognize the complex and stratified hierarchy of transnational media culture. In order to move beyond cultural imperialism's analyses of economic determinism and provide a needed correction to post-imperialists' work that ignores power and inequality, Kraidy's (2002) intercontextual theory of hybridity provides a useful framework. It explicates transnational cultural dynamics by articulating hybridity and hegemony in a global context. It allows us to understand under what conditions ideological elements become consolidated by emphasizing the discursive processes of making something to *appear* as norms, such as good/bad opposites (Bhabha, 1994), white people's tendency to position themselves as "unmarked" race (Phelan, 1993), high culture/low (popular) culture opposites (Fiske, 2011) and dominant/subordinate opposites (Hall, 1998). Thus, hybridity should not be used to simply justify a transnational phenomenon of media culture, but as a communicative practice and a mode in which identity is practiced, reinforced, negotiated and reproduced.

Theoretically recognizing hybridization as an inevitable phase for all contemporary cultures in the era of globalization (Nederveen Pieterse, 1994) is necessary in order to understand the politics of global and local relations, especially when it comes to popular culture. In the midst of the dynamic flow of hybridized media culture, the Korean Wave provides a unique case study. Scholars have attempted to study this unexpected worldwide popularity from this hitherto sub-imperial, sub-central nation. Previous studies have demonstrated that the non-threatening, clean-cut and visually pleasing aesthetic of Korean media texts appeal to Asian audiences because they are less violent, less aggressive and sexually less explicit than American media (Anderson & Shim, 2015; Jin, 2016; Shim, 2006). For example, the popularity of K-drama in Asia has been cited as presenting ‘Asian-ness’ with a modern image by skillfully repositioning and repackaging traditions into cultural products of highly modernized quality now, as Japan did 15-20 years ago (Iwabuchi, 2002; Larsen, 2008). As Boyd-Barrett (2013) stated, the Korean Wave illustrates a good example of precisely the phenomenon that led Tunstall to reverse his argument from “The Media are American” in 1977 to “The Media were American” in 2007. It also illustrates the increase of multiple modernities—which differs from the Western modernity—within globalization.

An extremely high level of hybridity is manifested in K-pop. The origin of a musical style (e.g., Hip Hop) loses significance within reciprocal processes of cultural interchange (Kim, 2013). Choi (2006) stresses the variety of times and places from which K-pop comes, claiming that Korean Wave texts encompass dimensions from traditional, modern and postmodern times from Korea, the United States, Europe, Africa, Japan, and

many other countries. To put it simply, the Korean Wave is an exemplar of contemporary global hybridity, just as Western culture itself is hybrid. Hall (1991) in his discussion of modernity, said, “Modern nations are all cultural hybrids,” (p. 617) pointing out that even the West, which is commonly understood within historical Eurocentrism and modernity, is also radically hybrid.

Kraidy (1999) focuses on the ‘transformative practices’ that define the intersection of globality and locality, and narrows down on the unavoidable issue of identity. Hybridity helps us to understand the local not merely as a location, but as a crossroads of transnational receptions (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). Therefore, instead of simply looking at how global media impacts locality, I find it more meaningful to seek out how cultural identities are reconstructed at the intersection of global and local discourses about the Korean Wave.

2. SOFT POWER AND TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA CULTURE

2.1. Multifaceted Soft Power of the Korean Wave

The Korean Wave phenomenon has proven to be more than a pop cultural craze as it penetrates into the world politics and international relations (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim, 2015a). The globalization paradigm, in terms of international relations, relates to an overarching concept called ‘soft power’ which looks at the power relations in world politics and international relations. In the Western context, the term was first coined in 1990 by Joseph Nye. It was then critiqued by an American communication scholar, Schiller (1991), who considered it a new form of U.S. cultural imperialism. Nye (2004) refined and promoted the idea in an attempt to recover the international image of the

United States after 9/11. More than a simple persuasion, soft power is the ability to entice, allure and attract others from outside of the country to think of the country favorably (Nye, 2004). Soft power has been challenged for not being a thorough theoretical concept for its illusive features (Brown, 2008; Fan, 2008; Frum & Perle, 2004; Murphy, 2010), and as just another implicit form of imperialism (Schiller 1991; McClory, 2015). However, this approach oversimplifies the multiple layers and facets of soft power in international relations and communication.

Nye further elaborated his argument over soft power in his 2011 book “The Future of Power” in which he explores the nature and shift in global power structures—from state to non-state actors. In a *mediatized* world (Couldry & Hepp, 2013) where public diplomacy is done more by the public, governments and state have to use “smart power” (a combination of soft and hard power), making dexterous use of formal and informal networks and increasingly drawing on “cyber power.” It creates unpredictable and volatile phenomena. Therefore, a more recent definition of soft power by Nye states it as the “ability to get preferred outcomes through the co-optive means of agenda-setting, persuasion and attraction” (Nye, 2011, p. 16). In this process of persuading foreign audiences to become attracted to a country’s own interests, a large number of non-state actors—transnational corporations, universities, think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, celebrities associated with creative and cultural industries—increasingly participate (Thussu, 2013). Nevertheless, the role of the state remains imperative.

It is important not to lose one’s footing on addressing the very real sociopolitical issues that undergird state and corporate deployment of ‘soft power’ to advance their own

interests both domestically and abroad ‘as we are now entering the age when states are getting deeply involved in the neoliberal circulation of media and popular culture by collaborating with media culture industries, nothing will be politically neutral’ (Iwabuchi, 2010, p. 92), dating back to U.S. promotion of Hollywood during and after World War 2. Yet, this approach replicates the very dichotomy of good/bad that has plagued fandom studies for decades, contrasting ‘good’ scholarship of the sociopolitical implications of fandom with ‘bad’ scholarship of its affective meanings and pleasures for fans. The sociopolitical framework of this discussion precludes their consideration of the pleasure fans derive from, which would enhance a critical opportunity to examine the complex intersection of affective investment and national subjectivity.

The way the Korean Wave creates soft power is distinct from the way historically powerful colonizers and imperialists—such as the United States, Britain, France, Germany or Japan—utilize their soft power in global/international contexts. Within the Asian sphere, it is true that Japan’s strong political, economic, and cultural power has influenced many Asian countries, which traces back to its colonial period. However, the colonial past prevents Japanese popular culture from deeply penetrating into some parts of Asia (Hong, 2014; Ryoo, 2009). Given this situation, the unique historical legacy leaves room for Korean popular culture and its products to find a niche in its neighboring markets because Korea doesn’t carry the burden of ‘colonial legacy’ that was present in Japanese media (Park, 1996; Ter Molen, 2014). There is a lingering anti-colonial sentiment lurking in the memories of people in many Asian countries. However, the Korean Wave appears to benefit from the sense of solidarity and sympathy

more than resentment in which people have toward a country that shared a similar colonial past and continues to struggle in a current postcolonial situation.

For example, Korea's sentiment of *han* (deep sorrow) is seen to be a less problematic source of power and ideological threat than Japanese cultural odor, which may remind of Japanese brutality during the colonial era (Hong, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2002). Whereas the Japanese popular culture industry consciously made it culturally odorless in an effort to universalize products and underplay associations with Japanese imperial history (Iwabuchi, 2002), the Korean Wave emphasizes hybridity of formats with localized content and appeal (Kim, 2009a; Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006). Unlike Japanese audiovisual products, K-pop and K-drama possess explicit cultural odor in terms of the agents who are associated with the country's bodily, racial and ethnic characteristics. In other words, the people in Korean audiovisual products represent physical features of a country of origin, as well as images of its nation, and these agents with Korean ethnicity physically appeal to international fans.

Geopolitically, other countries that have had a pan-Asian influence have been unpleasant political actors. China and Japan were imperial powers in the past and were perceived as colonialist across Asia (Hong, 2014). Unlike China and Japan, Korea has followed a different path by exerting power through its popular culture, not through coercive military and political power. Korea, which Chen (2000) called a 'sub-Empire' in part due to the historical confluence of media liberalizations occurred in the 1990s, has relatively smaller size of a land with limited natural resources. However, all these limitations and historical contexts ironically work together to exert its unique aspect of

soft power that differs from the ones exerted by historical imperial powers. I suggest we need a more flexible understanding of soft power, that does not build on hard power—economic and military—the way the power of the US or Japan does. The way the Korean Wave creates soft power by appealing to global audiences, including diverse races and ethnicities, elicits a different sense of attraction and ideological twists. Soft power is deeply interrelated with identity formation (Kim, 2009b), and this unique layer of soft power in the Korean Wave interrelates with fans’ identity negotiations in global/international contexts.

2.2. Emotional Proximity

Allowing for idiosyncratic differences among individual fandoms, I contend that transcultural fandoms have their genesis in affinities of industrial and/or semiotic practice between two or more popular cultural contexts. In studies of transcultural media, ‘affinity’ typically has been understood in terms of geographical proximities that as Straubhaar (1991) argues, foster ‘distinct regional cultural patterns’ (p. 55). Yet, it is in Straubhaar’s own (2007) acknowledgement of the increasingly dispersed flow of transcultural media outside of regional zones that the limitations of this perspective are pointed out, asking the question of how we might account for such phenomena.

How American fans find Korean popular culture attractive and pleasurable lies in their previous experience. Korean popular culture provides highly modernized looks that are fresh and polished enough. The carefully structured way of touching and arousing nostalgic emotion with high-quality products can be understood as *emotional proximity*, which I posit as another layer of Straubhaar (1991)’s cultural proximity theory. The

skillfully hybridized Korean media texts provoke certain nostalgia among American fans, which also ironically encourages them to rediscover their own identity and culture. Proximity theory (Straubhaar, 1991), preferring local to global for perceived cultural proximity, needs to be understood in more fluid terms. What one perceives as more culturally proximate does not necessarily equate with their nationality, linguistic or geographical proximity, but sometimes more closely related to *emotional proximity*.

As I noted earlier, there are multiple layers and varying facets of soft power. The way the Korean Wave exerts soft power in international contexts differs from the way historically imperialist countries and colonizers do; Korean popular culture is seen as less threatening in the eye of the beholder because socio-historically Korea has never invaded or colonized any other countries (Hong, 2014). Ryoo (2009) argues that because Korea has been considered as in-between ‘semi-periphery’ in international settings, the Korean Wave can find a niche and reposition itself as a cultural mediator in the midst of global cultural transformation. What is interesting is that the Korean Wave works as a mediator not only in Asia, but also within the Western context as I found in my study, which will be addressed later in the Findings Chapter. In other words, the Korean Wave brings American people with different racial/ethnic/social/cultural backgrounds together by creating shared emotional proximity.

In the realm of global popular culture and especially in Hollywood, the major players have been Caucasian with some African American/Black figures. Asian performers have seldom become major players with very few exceptions (Hogarth, 2013). In this vein, the Korean Wave can be viewed as a reaction and a challenge to

Western-dominated popular culture. K-pop and K-drama have distinct Asian physical features no matter how hybridized they are; the dramas reflect the traditional Asian values and ethos, which makes Asian audiences feel culturally proximate and some Western fans feel emotionally proximate. The Korean Wave fills a large demand (Jin, 2016) for audiences of both the East and the West that were desperately waiting for clean-cut performers and non-violent, non-aggressive and less promiscuous contents. The popularity of Korean popular culture among Americans is bound to have social, cultural, and political ramifications.

As I found in my study, which will be addressed later in the Findings Chapter, the U.S. fans—both non-White and White—find this very complex layer of hybridity in Korean popular culture *comfortably appealing* in which I argue is not the same as the notion of “exotic Orient” from Said (1978)’s Orientalism. Said (1978) has carefully articulated the mechanism of *exoticizing* the Orient in his oft-cited book, “Orientalism”; framing the Orient as exotic in the eyes of the Westerners as to position the West (the Occident) as superior. The identities and self-conceptions of the West are centrally implicated in their media coverage by portraying themselves as rational and thus having the White man’s burden and obligations toward *backward* non-Western regions and peoples (Barkawi, 2009). Said (1978) argued that the Occident *Orientalizes*—as the West having authority and authenticity over—the Orient culture as they face “a crisis in representation” in the transpersonal, transnational, and transcultural world infused with varying degrees of forces such as class, gender, race, and structure.

All cultures are hybrid, thus, hybridity cannot be the sole attribution of the Korean Wave's popularity in the United States. However, the well-received Korean Wave's hybridity may reflect Kraidy (2002)'s theory of intercontextual hybridity I mentioned earlier. The favorable reception of the Korean Wave shows what some American audiences have been missing in their own media. The complex and high level of hybridity in Korean popular culture reflects the argument that cultural hybridity ironically encourages local people to revisit and rediscover what they have neglected or forgotten (Kraidy, 2002; Ryoo, 2009). The great level of hybridity in Korean popular culture arouses emotional proximity among not only Asian audiences but also American audiences to realize what they have been missing out in the drive toward globalization and commercialization during the past decades.

3. AUDIENCES AND FANS OF TRANSCULTURAL MEDIA

3.1. Fandom Studies

Culture is inherently political because it is a constant succession, distribution, and redistribution of social practices and power (Fiske, 2011). The media convergence and the development of information communication technologies have enabled audiences to shape their media engagements and participatory culture in a greater variety of contexts on their own. This has been particularly prevalent in the study of fans and fan communities (Jenkins, 2004; 2006; Kim, 2015; Nightingale, 2011; Oh, 2015). Culture, which is comprised of meanings, discourses and texts, are always in relation to the social system, and in the case of today's society, that of white heterosexual male in patriarchal capitalism (Ang, 1996; Jung, 2011b). The resources of popular culture carry the interests

of the economically and ideologically dominant groups to sustain their status quo: The hegemony (Ang, 1996; Fiske, 2011). However, hegemonic power is necessary or possible only because of resistance. Therefore, these resources must carry contradictory meanings (Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1992; Hall, 1980; 1998) that cultural meaning is semiotic excess and does not carry only the dominant ideology.

Popular culture is always inevitably related to power structure in society. Bourdieu (1984) argued that social factors affect different modes of discrimination because of differential relationships to the structures of power. Thus, individual's cultural tastes (or habitus) are shaped by social structures to power rather than by individual's natural differences. A habitus involves not only the cultural dimension (taste, preference, and attitude) toward the cultural objects, but also the social dimension (economics and education) upon which those tastes are mapped. Thus, the differences in habitus are socio-economic. The ruling groups cultivated high or bourgeois culture in the fine arts both for their own enjoyment and as an invaluable ideological feature of monopoly capitalism as opposed to low or popular culture. Liberal notions about leisure to which a substantial amount of effort by bourgeois sociologists has been devoted perpetuate the mystification of popular culture, treating it as distasteful and apolitically. What is considered as popular culture, thus demarcated from "high" culture, is socially constructed (Bourdieu, 1984)

Fandom is a heightened form of popular culture in industrial societies. A fan is an 'excessive reader' who differs from the ordinary audience in degree rather than kind (Fiske, 1992). Fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value

system denigrates. It is thus associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people in terms of gender, race, age and class. Fiske (1992) analyzed three main characteristics of fandom: 1) discrimination and distinction (for example, Freud's narcissism of minor difference), 2) productivity and participation, and 3) capital accumulation.

As Henry Jenkins (1992) explains in his book, *Textual Poachers*, "Fandom blurs any clear-cut distinction between media producer and media spectator since any spectator may potentially participate in the creation of new artworks" (p. 246-247). Fans have been early adopters of the practices that characterize participatory culture. For many scholars, fans are interesting precisely because of these participatory and creative practices. However, scholars have often paid more attention to fans as spectators than to fans as producers as pointed out by few scholars (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Coppa, 2008). The ecology of fandom, a concept similarly drawn from Marilyn Cooper (1986), allows us to examine both the production and reception as activities "through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (p. 367). K-pop's reaction videos on YouTube provide a good example in this vein. K-pop reaction videos on YouTube, a kind of vids, is an individual's or small group's argument about a text, but it is formed by, and interpreted in terms of, other fans' ideas about that text, and those arguments and ideas are worked out within the multiple overlapping discourse communities that constitute fandom.

The term ecology encompasses much more than the individual producer and immediate context; it allows us to explore how producers interact to form systems and to

consider how all the characteristics of any individual producer both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other producers and pieces of work in the systems (Cooper, 1986). It also implies the inevitability of change: “An important characteristic of ecological systems is that they are inherently dynamic” (p. 368). Thinking of fandom as ecology will encourage scholars to articulate how fandom’s “individual voices, creative works, philosophies, resistances, and cultures” (Cupitt, 2008, p. 4.4) not only coexist but interact. The ecology metaphor helps us to think of fandom as a system or series of systems within which all fans participate in various ways, such as readers, writers, vidders, vid watchers, posters, commenters, lurkers, essayists, artists, icon makers, recommenders, coders, compilers of images and links, users and maintainers of archives and other infrastructures, and so on (Turk & Johnson, 2012).

The structural relationship between popular culture and dominance (such as official industry) can take two main forms: resistance or evasion (Fiske, 2011; Hall, 1980). The politics of fantasy and pleasure refer to the interior resistance of fantasy as the desire of the subordinate to exert control over the meanings of their lives, promoting their own interests more effectively in their everyday lives, producing a sense of empowerment (Fiske, 2011). Evasive and semiotic resistances can maintain a popular consciousness that can fertilize the growth of those conditions. The resistances of popular culture are not just evasive or semiotic; they may act as a constant erosive force upon the macro, weakening the system so that it is amenable to change at the structural level.

Evasive or interior resistance at the micro level has to be the base for progressive social change because only through this micro level, the greater organized collective

movement and revolutionary change can occur at the macro level. Popular culture evokes participation whereas a completed art-object of high culture does not. Hence, social/radical change (interior resistance at the individual level has to be a necessary base of macro-collective social action) is possible via popular culture, not high culture. This is why we need to take the politics of popular culture (Fiske, 2011), the politics of everyday life and the politics of pleasure (Ang, 1996) seriously.

Fandom culture is made by subgroup/subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also contradictorily serve the economic interests of the dominant capitalist system (Fiske, 1992). However, there is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control and opposes hegemonic forces; always a culture of conflict and struggle to make social meanings that are in their interests, not the official powerful. What is important to recognize is that the victories in this struggle and conflict produce popular pleasure (Fiske, 1992).

Media texts of popular culture are never self-sufficient structures of meanings themselves as some will argue highbrow high culture texts to be. They are provokers of meanings and pleasure and are full of humor, like *puns* (Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1992). They are completed only when taken up by people and applied into their everyday culture; hence, dominant (industry) *needs* the subordinate (fans). The aim of producer is to produce meanings that are relevant to everyday life as the principal product of the commercial mass media in monopoly capitalism is audience power (Smythe, 2001). Relevance is central to popular culture, such as eliminating cultural odor/specificity

(Iwabuchi, 2002), increasing proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) and minimizing cultural discount (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988), in order to appeal to the widest audiences possible.

The dominant industry works hard to maximize the consumption of its products and its profitability in ways that has some relevance to subordinate fans. In this regard, Marxist-inspired critical scholars' reductionist analyses of power structure and capitalism are greatly challenged by the communities of fandom who constitute the crucial part of popular culture. This unstable power of the dominant industrial culture is frequently illustrated by fan activities that even greatly influence on international politics (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim, 2015a), and the Korean Wave provides an interesting case study in this regard.

New media technologies shape new media environments as they derive various media outlets to converge. A theory of media convergence states that major shifts of technology and patterns of media ownership shape the balance of power within the new media era (Jenkins, 2004). Jenkins (2004) argued that convergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Consumers are using different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control, to increase their interactivity with others and to participate more fully. The proliferation of technologies for reproduction and distribution of media texts allowed people to enjoy them in situations of their own choosing rather than at the hands of the broadcaster or producer. The convergence of old and new media has blurred the line of what a medium is. YouTube, for instance, as one of the user-generated social media channels has been a harbinger of changing the way audiences consume information beyond physical and

national boundaries. Its widely distributable characteristic is one of the most important implications that traditional one-way mainstream corporate media can no longer exert total control over the distribution and reproduction of their own media content (Ha & James, 1998; Hanson & Haridakis, 2008). As we shall see, YouTube as a new digital television technology has been crucial to the spreadable Korean Wave across cultures.

In this dynamically shifting process, fans have been among the first to create opportunities to meet, talk and share ideas, information, images and do creative work: creating what Appadurai (1991, 1996) called the ‘shared collective experiences in mediascape’ on a global scale. Jenkins (2006) examines the activities of online fan communities and convergence of media culture, which encourage participation and collaboration that will eventually lead to a fairer and more democratic society. In the face of new media era, Jenkins (2006) argued that we need to avoid the either-or logic of traditional approaches to audience research, and refuse to see media consumers as either totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the cultural industries.

Some scholars assert that the idea of contra-flow—the claim that the U.S. dominance of the global media market is seriously challenged by other countries’ media products and the importance of emerging markets—should be examined with cautions (Kang, 2015; Lie, 2012; Thussu, 2006). However, I find this political-economic-driven argument problematic because it neglects the non-negligible “intellectual craftsmen” (Choi & Maliankay, 2015): the fans. There are myriad ways of studying the Korean Wave within the globalization paradigm. One crucial element, however, is the study of fans. The Korean Wave and its fandom, which has the largest size of recent fandom

worldwide according to the Guinness Book of World Records (Anderson, 2014), provide a good example when studying global media culture. There are two governance systems in the Korean Wave: 1) a transnational cultural phenomenon, ascribing influence to overseas fans, and 2) a national institutional campaign, ascribing influence to the state's national policy (Choi, 2015). Of course, the Korean creative industry, once known as cultural industry, indeed remains to place a strong foot. When exporting cultural products, they not only export the media content, but also symbols. Thus, it is true that the Korean Wave can be understood as a political movement fueled by the unexpected popularity of its popular culture overseas.

Nevertheless, one should be careful when understanding the Korean Wave as a national-institutional campaign because its phenomenon is *profoundly dependent* on overseas fans (even the term Korean Wave was coined by Chinese media and fans in the 1990s). Thanks to the nation's ubiquitous high technologies and international users' easy accessibility to social media, it was hitherto geographically scattered fans across the globe who first created the Korean Wave phenomenon, *not* the state. The new media such as social media is a vital element creating unfathomable spread of information in both speed and scope, known as spreadable media (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Jin & Yoon, 2014) and causing *disjunctures* in the *detrterritorialized global mediasphere* (Appadurai, 1996). Seen in this vein, media technologies should not be seen as merely instruments but as living organisms of our lives. Because it is, after all, the people who create, circulate, and receive media texts embedded in technological devices. In spite of the lack of organizational hubs, overseas fans shape interactive "circuit of

culture” (Hall, 1980) through various fan-generated social media, such as YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, etc. It is the active participatory culture and “collective intelligence” (Levy, 1997) of fans and new media users of both local and international in the *detrterritorialized mediascape* who effectively initiated circulation of media texts of the Korean Wave, making it transnational or even global in the 21st century.

3.2. Identity and Cultural Capital

One of the interesting distinctions between official and fan-produced culture is economic rather than quality. In other words, fans do not re/produce texts of their object of fandom for money; their products are not for profit. Jenkins (1992) has pointed out that there is a strong distrust of making a profit in fandom. Their textual productivity is in the name of expanding their fan cultural capital, not in making profit out of their labor (Fiske, 1992). Fans’ resistance against making profit can be seen as both internal and communal resistance against the dominant hegemony although there are exceptions. This resonates with the work of fan studies scholars (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012; Sandvoss, 2005; Hills, 2002) about how fandoms and fans constantly negotiate between consumerism and resistance.

Jenkins himself, along with other mainstream fandom scholars, have moved away from his initial concept of fans as ‘poachers’ to fans as ‘activists.’ Social organizations such as the ‘Harry Potter Alliance and Racebending’ mobilize young people—fans—by deploying the same strategies fans use in letter-writing and ‘Save the Show’ campaigns, thus inspiring their supporters to move from engagement within participatory culture to involvement in political life (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). This

goes beyond simply acknowledging that fans are active producers who collaboratively produce transformative works, be they fan fiction, YouTube reaction videos, or providing subtitles to foreign languages. Fans, like social activists, are mobilized as active participants in social and political movements because they are united by a common factor: their inevitable interaction with popular culture, resulting in the “curious coexistence within fan cultures of both anti-commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices” (Hills, 2002, p. 28) that has come to characterize contemporary fan cultures.

Fans are, to a great degree, the manifestation of the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980) because when the commercial texts meet fans, the moment of reception becomes the moment of production in fan culture. Accumulation of knowledge is fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). At the same time, they are among the most discriminating and selective of all categories of people and the cultural capital they produce is the most actively circulated, shared, distributed, and visible. In capitalist societies, popular culture is necessarily related to the products of capitalism. However, popular culture does not always work in the preferences of culture industries, rejecting many more than adopting because the very nature of people, culture, and society is unpredictable and fluid.

3.3. Fans of the Korean Wave in the United States

As the world becomes ever more heavily mediated, the audience researchers’ task expands further to explain how often contradictory assumptions of audiences—citizens versus consumers, individuals versus crowds, participants versus couch

potatoes—can all be part of the same population (Livingstone, 2015). Audience research is still worthwhile to pursue, for researchers will have something to contribute and require more empirical investigation. In other words, audience studies must be continued for each generation in relation to each new phase of socio-technological change and reflexively rearticulated as the very conditions of modernity persist to be reconfigured globally as ordinary people experience their every life in a “digital world” (Couldry, 2014).

There is no linear starting and ending point as the famous linear process of communication model suggests (Lasswell, 1948), but rather Hall (1980)’s model of the “circuit of culture” provides a fruitful framework to articulate today’s highly *mediatized* global world of media flow. The model recognizes audiences as vital agents in the completion of the “circuit of culture” in which all elements—production, text, institution, representation, interpretation, symbol and identity—of the whole process are mutually articulated in the mediation of culture (Mayer, 2005). The struggles over meaning are not dependent upon a single independent moment, but at the interfaces between the distinct yet mutually dependent moments in the overall circuit (Livingstone & Das, 2013). The circuit is not a matter of linking among autonomous spheres of activity, but rather, recognizing that each moment in the circuit is constituted dynamically through its interface with the others.

K-pop fandom is multifaceted and polycentric, and K-pop has become a conduit through which political objectives are communicated through which heterogeneous interests of international fans are negotiated (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). One of the

reasons why this cultural phenomenon creates particularly flurry discussions is that it creates ideological twists in the traditional hegemony. For example, Western female fans' play with the *kkonminam* (soft masculinity) image of K-pop male idols defy earlier ideas of what ideal masculinity, set by Western White males, should mean (Jung, 2010; Oh, 2015a). K-pop fandom among Caucasian fans shows the covert pleasure of *soft racism* in the image of them cheering and admiring K-pop male idols.

What I mean by soft racism is that K-pop male idols' popularity among Whites "messes with" (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015) the deeply saturated social structure of racial and cultural superiority. This soft racism, according to Choi and Maliangkay (2015), is neither ethnocentrism nor cultural essentialism, which has consistently been the case in global popular culture (e.g., Hollywood films). Rather, this soft racism is forms of continuous negotiation and soft retribution toward racism that has spawned by the violent enforcement of colonialism, ensuing disparities in human values and self-esteem between the Cultural North and South, colonizer and colonized, and the Occident and the Orient (Said, 1978). This, I argue, is one of the multifaceted layers of Korea's soft power, unintentionally and unconsciously generated from its international (mostly female) fans in world politics, which differs from historical colonizers' soft power in great degree.

3.4. The Need for a Local, Ethnographic Perspective and Method

Ethnography unravels the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, *deterritorialized* world (Appadurai, 1991). Many people living in late modernity experience the global in their local life. Since the 1990s, international communication studies moved away from bullet magic and cultural imperialism theories and into cultural

globalization and more fragmented eclecticism. In this environment, an ethnographic approach to the global-local nexus provides fruitful understandings as it radically intercontextualizes different forms of hybridity (Kraidy, 2002) and moves toward a more necessarily context-sensitive approach to understand the structure of power in a lived experience of culture.

Geertz (1973) once asserted that “we do not study research sites, we study *in* them” (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003, p. 14). The situatedness of the local is not a site, but rather a point of reference through which to engage the emergent dimensions of globalization. This global interrogation through the lens of the local requires us not to rely on ‘canned’ visions of what the world historical system is like, but to take an appropriate ethnographic view that macro system terms of analysis should be radically reconsidered from the ground up (Marcus, 1998). It needs to take the micro-knowledge about places, spaces, sites, and performance derived from ethnographic inquiry and at the same time challenge macro-level theoretical framework of media. Globalization and culture demand that we risk making some broader claims about the relationship between micro ideology and micro experience. Carey (1975) encouraged communication researchers to make macro claims from micro matters by studying media use as particular rituals. Combination of micro and macro-levels of inquiry of power and culture is needed in media ethnography in the realm of global media studies. In other words, ethnographic inquiry with its base in local practices and the lived performative features of culture offers rich materials to bridge the gap between meaning and structure without losing sight of the complexity and power imbalances of cultural consumption. Inquiring

transformative power of globalization through local cultural practice without neglecting the global structural concerns is what media ethnography is positioned to address.

If global media studies is to establish a more grounded theoretical orientation toward globalization, then that theorizing essentially has to be informed by the materials produced through fieldwork (Geertz, 1973; Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). Then a question arises, how can one develop more contextually grounded ethnographies while expanding the notion of the field to address the unique dilemmas of localized research in relation to the global issues raised by transnational media processes? Martin-Barbero (1993) suggests that we can address the interplay between ideology and experience by seeking out the hegemony within popular culture. The convergence of popular culture and media reception studies has been successfully attempted by cultural scholars (Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1998; Morley, 1980; Nardi, 2010; Radway, 1984; Silverstone, 1990), stressing the necessary importance of interpretive approach to audience reception studies, the politics of everyday life, and audience as not only decoder but also encoder, without neglecting the power inequities.

Understanding globalization in ethnographic depth necessitates new deployments of ethnography; that is locally based but globally engaged (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). The process of globalization is best understood from a local perspective, one that takes into account particular contexts and the lived experience of local people (Ryoo, 2004). Media ethnography in critical cultural studies tends to take particular groups of people, such as audiences in specific subcultures or fandom, as an empirical starting point. Culture cannot be considered as a transparent object of empirical inquiry, a finished entity that

can be discovered and quantitatively documented by the ethnographer. Studying and writing about culture is a discursive construction (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010), which embeds a researcher's personal point of view no matter how accurate the researcher is in data gathering and inference process. Clifford (1986) once said "'cultures' do not hold still for their portraits" (p. 10).

The goal of the ethnographer, therefore, is an intellectual and transparent commitment to talk about the *necessarily complex* relationships among multiple entities of communication—media, culture, audiences, and society—as compelling and persuasive as possible in the context of specific problems which arise from particular realm of cultural politics. Media ethnography has been the method par excellence for scholars whose interests lie in context-bound media cultural studies. However, globalization demands new ethnographic methods if we are to understand the articulation of local matrices with global processes. This direction of the ethnographic lens was advocated by Appadurai (1991) who invited ethnographers to investigate the "micropolitics of locality." The task of ethnography now becomes the unraveling of the following conundrum: What is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized and the so-called *deterritorialized*—the idea of seemingly borderless flows of culture, economy, and people—world? How can we understand the complex process and mediation of the nexus of global and local?

Fans understand and deploy the objects or texts of another culture through the means they have at their disposal within their own popular cultural contexts. Yet, as media increasingly become implicated in intensifying patterns of distribution and

dissemination through mainly the Internet-based platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Tumblr, I find that these convergent transnational contexts are becoming increasingly global in scope: for example, *oppa*⁴, *maknae*⁵, *hwaiting*⁶, etc. The call for greater local contextualization of studies of transnationally circulating media is a valuable contribution to our attempts to grasp the complexity of such media flows and fandoms. Yet, I would argue that any consideration of the ways in which globalization plays out in fandom should proceed from both contexts and our informed understanding of fan behaviors, motivations, and processes of meaning-making as driven by affective pleasures and investments.

The theoretical approach of cultural hybridity to the Korean Wave phenomenon has de-emphasized the multiple process and practices international fans generate. Most of the previous studies of the Korean Wave addressed the *whats*, *hows*, and *whys* of international fans and audiences enjoyment of Korean popular culture and dealt with various potential implications and meanings of the phenomenon both within and outside of the Korean territory. While these studies conducted various methods such as surveys, interviews, textual and discourse analysis to examine the phenomenon, very few provides first-hand ethnographic empirical explorations and interpretations of media reception that are *always* context-bound (Geertz, 1973).

Based on previous studies, we already know that some international audiences or

⁴*Oppa* is a respectful Korean word used by females to call older males.

⁵*Maknae* refers to the youngest member in a K-pop group.

⁶*Hwaiting* is used as a cheer or word of encouragement like “let’s go” or “do your best.” It can also mean “good luck.”

fans enjoy interacting with Korean popular culture. However, what has been ignored so far in the realm of the Korean Wave studies are the mechanisms in which interaction occurs, continues, and intensifies. Any form of interaction and reception is constructed and functions in a specific social and historical context. The media ethnographic approach in my dissertation—a relatively long period of immersion in the scene where the actual reception of the Korean Wave among American fans occurs—provides appropriate tools to know these mechanisms as a living organism.

Hence, I do not attempt to provide generalizations about how American fans *mediatize* with Korean popular culture, but rather, by providing an in-depth, if necessary, fragmented moment of the whole ecology of transcultural media and fandom, I attempt to uncover detailed analyses and possible conceptualizations based on connecting recurring patterns. I use the term *mediatize* in a sense that the broad consequences of media, media texts, and media platforms are embedded in the everyday life, context, and practice (Couldry & Hepp, 2013) of the U.S. fans of Korean popular culture I have interacted over the past two years as, I argue later in the Findings Chapter, the Korean Wave and its fans form ecology of transcultural media and fandom. Moreover, the past century of the Western-centered scholarship talking to itself about audiences has permitted it to take contextual factors for granted. My work is a reversed ethnographic approach, which is not necessarily the same as the often so-called de-Westernized approach (Livingstone, 2015). In other words, I perceive my work to be not only a de-Westernized approach, but more “reversed” in that the fans being studied are Westerners and the point of departure and the gaze placed upon them is from a non-Westerner’s perspective. The reception of

their media culture is non-Western—the globality, albeit arguable, of Korean popular culture—in their Western locality.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Various qualitative methods are employed throughout this study to observe American fans' reception of Korean popular culture, mostly but not limited to K-pop, K-drama, films, Korean language, history, and food. With an overarching approach of what I call "reversed media ethnography," my study employs participant observation and qualitative interviews to examine the nature of the transcultural media and fans of the Korean Wave in the United States. My research revolves around the realms of globalization theories, hybridity, soft power, and fan studies in an attempt to address the following inquiries: What motivates Americans to interact with Korean popular culture? How do they consume, interpret, and reproduce with Korean popular culture? What are the cross-cultural similarities and differences they see in Korean popular culture versus American popular culture? What aspects of soft power can be found within Americans' reception of Korean popular culture? What implications does Korean Wave's soft power have on American fans' identity? How does cultural hybridity of Korean popular culture un/consciously facilitate sociocultural implications of soft power in the United States, arguably one of the strongest cultural industries in the world? And what cultural, social, and political implications does the Korean Wave yield in global/international contexts?

1. REVERSED MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY

Whereas traditional ethnography conducted by anthropologists is extremely local, media ethnographic approach to global media studies attempts to move radically from local to global—interlocked with reception studies—in the much more complex and dynamic realm of globalization (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). One critical view of

ethnography was that the ethnographic practice was seen as a product of colonial and thus Western-philic discourses, a charge that focused mainly on how ethnographies inscribed ethnocentric perspectives (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). Traditional ethnographic research was conducted by Western researchers into the so-called non-Western cultures and people as exotic “Other,” and thus the point of departure inevitably reflected the Western perspectives (Weiss, 1994). Seen in this vein, I consider my study to be a reversed media ethnographic approach because a) instead of studying and asking people about their culture, I am studying their understanding of my native culture, which is somewhat like studies that have been done in places like Israel about their reactions to U.S. culture on television (Katriel, 2012), but again, reversing the focus to examine impacts in the US; and b) I am observing Westerners through a non-Westerner’s gaze.

This study employed a reversed media ethnography over a period of two years, which includes participant observation recorded in field notes and various structures and types of interview methods, such as ethnographic—also known as the informal conversational interview (Patton, 1990)—occurring in the midst of my social interactions with them, respondent—aiming at disclosing their subjective standpoints, views, actions and less concerned with the “facts” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011), and discursive interviews. I regularly engaged in participatory observation of the meetings, events, and activities related to Korean popular culture between early 2015 and early 2017. I used a semi-structured interview to allow for more flexible and organic expressions, opinions, and experiences of interviewees outside of structured questions. The structure of interviews is more flexible, often leading to new topics and inviting interviewees to freely express and

talk about their thoughts, opinions, and feelings so that richly expressive *inter*-views would emerge that neither an interviewer nor an interviewee could have produced alone.

The followings are the basic set of interview questions I asked for all informants:

“Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?”

“What culture do you identify with the most? What ethnicity?”

“How did you get to know about Korean popular culture?”

“What motivates you to interact with Korean popular culture?”

“What aspects of Korean popular culture are attractive/appealing to you?”

“How do you consume Korean popular culture? What media platforms/outlets do you use for Korean popular culture?”

“Where do you get news about Korean popular culture? How do you get updated?”

“What are the similarities and differences between Korean popular culture and American popular culture?”

“Do you consider language barrier as a hindrance to your interaction with Korean popular culture? If so, what do you do to resolve that problem?”

“What aspects of Korean popular culture do you find difficult to understand?”

“What do you do when you don’t understand certain media text/content of Korean popular culture?”

“What are some of the pros and cons of Korean popular culture?”

“Have you ever participated either online or offline fan activities regarding Korean popular culture?”

“How do you perceive Korean fandom vs. international fandom of K-pop?”

“Why do you like Korean popular culture in particular? Why not other East Asian popular culture, like J-pop or Chinese drama?”

“Does your interest in Korean popular culture expand further to other aspects of Korea, such as history or contemporary politics?”

“Now that you regularly consume and interact with Korean popular culture, has it changed your pre-perceptions of Korea?”

“How does Korean popular culture relate to your life now?”

2. PARTICIPANTS AND INFORMANTS

There is an online social media site of local groups where people sharing similar interests gather together to improve themselves and their local communities. Within this site, there is a *Korean Interest Group* (a pseudonym, hereafter KIG), which is a non-profit and non-governmental organization founded in the 2010s. Most members in this group live in Texas and share a similar interest: Korean popular culture. There are about 400 members registered in KIG. Among them, about 30 members regularly gather once or twice a week and participate in various activities related to Korean popular culture; learning Korean language, watching K-dramas, discussing and sharing information about Korean popular culture and Korean celebrities, eating Korean cuisine, attending K-pop concerts, practicing K-pop choreography, etc.

KIG is comprised of people with the U.S. nationality except a couple of native Koreans (including myself), and the group consists of multiple races and ethnicities: Caucasian American, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American and a few

others. None of them previously knew each other before joining the group. Among the regular 30 members of the group, females outnumber males approximately by three to one. The ages range from teens to 50s with most participants clustered in the 20s and 30s. Some of them are self-claimed dedicated K-pop and/or K-drama *fans*, while others are perceived to be general *audiences* who have genuine interests in Korean popular cultures—such as Korean language, cuisine, films, etc.

There are about 14 key informants whom I have closely interacted on a regular basis and conducted in-depth interviews periodically for the past two years. I considered my 14 key informants as a large enough number because that is when I started to see recurring patterns during the interview process. Qualitative interview scholars, such as Spradley (1979), consistently note that one has enough interviews when one begins to see consistent and recurring patterns. They are all from varying backgrounds; they were born and raised in the United States for a significant amount of time, lived in Texas for the most part of their lives, are not native Korean, speak English as their first language, and primarily identify themselves as American. My informants voluntarily took part in my research mainly because I had been establishing close rapport with them by regularly attending their events and hanging out with them. All of that ethnographic interaction before and after the actual interviews also provides data for this study. Although they are from different cultural and social backgrounds, they share a common identity: Fans of the Korean popular culture and a stronger desire to build their cultural capital of Korea than general audiences.

Number	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Native Language	Race
1	Angie	Early 30s	Female	USA	English	Caucasian
2	Anya	Late 40s	Female	USA	English	Caucasian
3	Binzy	Late 30s	Female	USA	English	South Asian
4	Greyson	Late 20s	Male	USA	English	Caucasian
5	Iliana	Late 10s	Female	USA	English	South Asian
6	J.C.	Mid 20s	Female	USA	English	Black
7	Joseph	Early 30s	Male	USA	English	Hispanic
8	Leoy	Late 20s	Female	USA	English	Caucasian
9	Miranda	Late 10s	Female	USA	English	Hispanic
10	Rosalie	Late 20s	Female	USA	English	Half-Black, Half-Asian
11	Sean	Late 20s	Male	USA	English	Caucasian
12	Tiffany	Late 20s	Female	USA	English	Half- Caucasian, Half-Asian
13	TinTin	Mid 20s	Female	USA	English	Black
14	Theia	Mid 30s	Female	USA	English	Black

Table 2: Major Informants

The rich corpus of data I have collected over a two-year period illustrates cultural practices and relationships that cannot be found in quantified numbers. During my participant observation, I frequently took field notes using my digital devices (mostly smartphone and laptop) when interacting with the members of KIG. At first, I took field

notes in more extensive details including both verbal and non-verbal communication: observing the ways they interact with K-drama, Korean film, K-pop-related media texts, and the ways they talk about the issues related to Korean culture. As time passed and as I started to see recurring patterns, however, I realized I took field notes less frequently. The more I immersed myself in building relationships with my major informants and the more I built closer rapport with them, I felt that my participant observation is more than a mere ethnographic observation. But rather, somewhat a complete participation in ways that my interaction with them inevitably has affected the formation of their identities and their reception of Korean popular culture and vice versa, which may lead to the Hall (1980)'s notion of a “circuit of cultures” that the complicated webs of cultures are always multidirectional, not unilateral.

I consider my interview types to be “respondent interviews” (Tracy, 2013), “friendship model of interviews” (Tracey, 2013), and “ethnographic interviews” (Spradley, 1979). I thought respondent interviews are an appropriate type to employ because my informants have appropriate experiences that attend to my main research goal: examining the reception of the Korean Wave in the United States. According to this interview type, an interviewee speaks primarily of and for herself/himself—about her/his own motivations, experiences, and behaviors. Respondent interviews are particularly worthwhile when attempting to understand similarities and differences within a certain cultural group (Tracy, 2013). The following instance illustrates how my interview with one of my primary informants initiated in the earlier stage of my ethnographic work. One day, Angie emailed me asking me if I would be interested in going to a yoga class with

her. By that time, I was considering her as my primary informant among the KIG members. I thought it would be a great chance to ask her for an interview. In my reply to her email, I said I would love to go to the yoga class with her and asked her whether she would be willing to be interviewed about her interest in Korean popular culture. Upon each other's approval, we set the date and time via emails. The interview took place in one of the cafes in Texas. A reasonable expectation of the interview is for an hour and a half or 2 hours (Weiss, 1994). However, my interview with her lasted about 3 and a half hours because not only me but also she wanted to ask me a lot of questions about what it is really like to live in a Korean society and about Korean culture in general. She seemed extremely curious about many layers and aspects of my native culture in which she confessed later that it is all because she has been largely influenced by K-dramas.

All of my major informants told me that the main reason they joined KIG is because they wanted to talk about Korean popular culture with similar-minded others. As time passed, my informants and I have become close friends to an extent that we felt comfortable and at ease enough to frankly talk about almost everything, even sensitive issues. Because of the close rapport between my informants and I, it seemed appropriate to approach interview stances as a "friendship model of interviewing" in which the interviewer and the interviewee treat each other as intimate friends rather than as objects (Tracy, 2013). I also consider the interview type I employed for my dissertation to be an ethnographic interview, which is more informal, conversational, and emergent. I would ask them what kinds of K-dramas they have been watching lately over casual lunch, or I

would ask them what they think about their latest favorite K-pop idol groups' performance on our way to a K-pop concert together.

To meet my research goals, I preset a list of interview questions based on previous studies and with the help of my academic advisors. On the interview scenes, I provided them a copy of a consent form to ensure them that their names will be kept anonymous and every information and voice recording will be stored in a safe place. Interviews took place in various locations, sometimes at coffee shops, restaurants, my house, informant's house, in the park, or at the locations right after KIG events/activities. After writing a transcript of my first interview, I realized that just reading a transcript gives a different feeling and vibe from physically being on the interview scene. This is because interpreting nonverbal expressions such as facial expressions and body language is a crucial part of interviewing (Tracy, 2013). Interviews provide various emotional phases (Kvale, 1996), and therefore, readers would interpret my interviewee's thoughts and opinions differently from mine. For example, my interviewee's nonverbal expressions were more vibrant and dramatic when she, who identified herself as a feminist, was talking about gender inequality embedded in both American and Korean culture. Having more vivid nonverbal expressions transferred a stronger sense of struggles, which one has to physically be there in order to recognize and appreciate it.

As I depart from stacks of books and classroom discussion and got immersed into the real field and culture of my informants, I gradually realized that ethnography and qualitative interviews require careful skills and judgment to digest even the subtle and nuanced meanings people provide to the full potential: artifacts lie in the eye of the

beholder. After conducting a series of interviews with my primary informants, I was befuddled by having a large corpus of data waiting to be analyzed. Analyzing data, which I refer to as an “unraveling process,” enabled me to discover questions to ask in future interviews, and also led me to find out what things mean to my informants. Analysis of qualitative data involves a careful way of thinking; it refers to the systematic examination of something to determine its parts, the relationship among parts, and their relationship to the whole (Spradley, 1979).

It is important to address the idea of self-reflexivity in my reversed ethnographic approach. My multiple layers of identities—one in which a native Korean who has lived in the US trying to understand how Americans interact with Korean popular culture—and my participation in the field may have affected the reception and expression of my participants and primary informants. Ethnographers, as an instrument, not only participate in the field, but also in their data as they analyze it (Gray, 2002), and that is what I did. I flexibly moved in and out of my data, which enabled me to provide more than the objective, positivist perspective. I carried a “burden of authorship” (Ang, 1996) throughout all stages of my project. My ethnographic authorship is a form of cultural inscription that reveals the politics of our intellectual work. My ultimate political responsibility as an ethnographer is an honest and transparent self-reflexivity in my identity and research process and a show of sincere respect toward my participants and informants.

Throughout my entire ethnographic work, I tried to be honest and transparent when immersed with the KIG and my informants. From very early on when I joined KIG,

I identified myself as a transnational researcher from a university and an academic of Korean popular culture. I was sometimes outspoken about my particular research interests in transnational media culture, Korean Wave, and fandom culture. The more I immersed myself in building a close rapport with my key informants, I felt that my participant observation was more than an ethnographic observation. Rather, it was a somewhat a complete participation in ways that my interaction with them inevitably has affected the formation of their identities and their reception of Korean popular culture and vice versa. Hall (1980) once said that the complicated webs of cultures are not unilateral but always multidirectional, a “circuit of cultures.”

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) provides strong framework to argue against a criticism that ethnographic research is ‘unscientific.’ It combines an analytic procedure of constant comparison of the explicit coding procedure—data into quantifiable form—and the style of theory development. Grounded theory generates and produces concepts from recurring patterns found in data. Researchers use grounded theory as a reference to derive theoretical concepts from the qualitative analysis of data in addition to substantiating the interpretation based on participants’ use of words and meanings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It rests on qualitative data and methods and is specifically focused on the inductive development of theory from data. Ethnographers collect data and code, analyze, and pull out elements that have patterns; dissecting data to find recurring patterns is the key of grounded theory. Ethnographers, making frequent comparisons across the data, as they are free and flexible to move ‘in and out’ of the data, are able to develop, modify, and extend theoretical propositions. The nature of global

media culture directs us to focus on complex processes, requires us to rely on field observation and qualitative interviews, and develop explanations rather than experimentation and prediction. This interpretive approach reflects that the immense complexity of what I study—communication comprised of people, culture, society, and media—has consciousness as fluid living organisms.

My ethnographic records and data consist of textual, aural, and visual records of the 14 informants, other members of KIG, objects, events, and processes under study. I employ various qualitative and interpretive techniques including grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the rich corpus of data: process of labeling and breaking down raw data, known as data management and data reduction, and then reconstituting them into categories, patterns, themes, concepts and propositions, known as conceptual development (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Analysis and interpretation are joined together in explicating meaning. I attempt to reconstitute data into conceptual development—such as patterns, themes, and concepts—to support my arguments and that my evidence is both citations from my field notes about what I have observed and quotes from interviews. I reiterate that I do not attempt to provide generalizations about how American fans *mediatize*—in a sense that the broad consequences of media, media texts, and media platforms are embedded in the everyday life, context, and practice (Couldry & Hepp, 2013)—with Korean popular culture. But rather, by providing an in-depth, fragmented moment of whole ecology, I attempt to uncover detailed analyses and possible conceptualizations by connecting recurring patterns and themes.

A major strength of qualitative media ethnographic research remains its wonderful blend of strategic mindfulness and unexpected discovery (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The findings are based on the data I observed, collected, and studied over the two years, which I reconstituted into conceptual development: recurring patterns and themes. Grounded theory is based on constant comparative analysis of observations and interviews over time, so that theoretical patterns gradually emerge and are then confirmed by subsequent observations and interviews. The following analyses in the next chapter explicate multiple aspects of the transcultural Korean Wave and its fans in the United States.

Chapter 4: Findings

1. INTRODUCTION TO MAIN THEMES

The following is a brief delineation of the findings I categorized in accordance with the research questions addressed above:

First, hybridity of Korean popular culture creates complicated webs of transcultural media. I find that American fans perceive Korean popular culture as similar to their own in terms of both cultures being capitalist-driven, industrialized economic societies, but different in the cultural plane. There is a distinct scent or perception of a specific Korean modernity in the cultural plane, such as alternative forms of gender representation, cute culture, and honorific culture. The notion of cultural appropriation demands mutual understanding of each other's histories. Global social media, as a main conduit of interaction with Korean popular culture, facilitates the spread and popularity of Korean popular culture, yet simultaneously creates cross-cultural misunderstanding and disjunctures.

Second, U.S. fans find a certain emotional proximity in Korean popular culture. Korean popular culture seems to be particularly good at carefully structuring and skillfully formulating media content and texts with polished and modernized looks to arouse a certain feeling of affinity: what I call emotional proximity, another layer of Straubhaar's (1991) cultural proximity theory. Korean popular culture reflects the traditional Asian values and ethos, which makes Asian audiences feel culturally proximate, while *comfortably appealing* to Western audiences with its wholesome content. This may be an example of what La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) call value

proximity across different cultures. It works as a mediator not only within the East, but also in the West by filling a large demand and void (Jin, 2016) for audiences who were looking for clean-cut, non-aggressive, and less sexualized content. U.S. fans find the very complex layers of hybridity in Korean popular culture comfortably appealing, associated with a notion of *appreciation*, not *exoticization*.

Third, the notion of *woori-ness* (we-ness in English) embedded in Korean popular culture and its fandom culture is an appealing form of group or cultural solidarity. It had a strong appeal to my informants and works as one of the multifaceted soft power in the eyes of U.S. fans that leads to an alternative post-Western soft power.

Fourth, U.S. fans, as transcultural regions of Korean Wave in the global sphere, have a certain determination to build cultural capital, especially Korean language, and yearn for validity. The transcultural Korean Wave becomes a whole ecology to U.S. fans.

2. HYBRIDITY OF TRANSCULTURAL KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE

2.1 Similar yet Different

Transnational media engenders an unpredictable, fluid, and creative form of hybridization when crossing borders (Shim, 2006). By looking at how Korean popular culture hybridizes various cultural forms by incorporating their local sentiment and creating new forms, we can come closer to understanding what aspects of hybridity in Korean popular culture appeal to Americans beyond Asia. One of my inquiries was to see how my informants perceived Korean popular culture and their own popular culture in terms of similarities and differences. Speaking from economic and political perspectives, both are industrialized, capitalist, democratic, and wired societies. Yet, the cultural plane

differs. Although both countries are capitalist societies, when it comes to pop culture, their media content is different. For example, two of the main informants, Leoy and Greyson, note that specifically, but also note that some of the key forms of cultural industry seem to be quite different, resulting in different impressions of how genuine the artists are:

Leoy: Both cultures are media-driven; both industrialized, modernized in a way that's not true for other countries.

Greyson: Both cultures being very capitalist-driven... But in the entertainment industry, the major difference to me, it seems like a lot of Western musical acts, they get this 'holier than thou' mentality that 'Oh my CD sold 2 million albums.' They think they are the best thing that's ever created on the planet whereas [in Korean artists], it doesn't seem, they seem more genuine of a person.

The honorific culture⁷—placing value on being respectful, polite, and humble—embedded in Korean popular culture was seen as one of the major appealing aspects that differ from their own American culture. Three of my main informants—Angie in her early 30s, Sean in his late 20s, and Greyson in his late 20s—compare and contrast U.S.

⁷Mainly derived from Confucianism, Korea's honorific culture—placing value on harmony, politeness, and humbleness—is well manifested in its language. Korean language uses an extensive system of honorifics—such as *unni* (a respectful word that females use to call other females who are older), *noona* (a respectful word that males use to call females who are older), and *oppa* (a respectful word that females use to call males who are older)—that are considered very important features of the language and are used to indicate the relative ages and social positions of the speakers.

and Korean popular culture in addition to sharing their perceptions about the honorific culture embedded in Korean popular culture:

Angie: There is something about Korean media... kind of speaks to me in a way that American media don't... I read a little article on the difference between *banmal* (informal way of speaking) and *jondemal* (formal way of speaking). To hear there's completely different ways of speaking depending on how you relate to someone, and how in *jondemal*, you can't even say 'you' directly to a person, is fascinating.

Sean: Isn't there a Korean word *jeong* (unselfish giving)? The whole culture of *noona* (older sister), *hyung* (older brother)... Once I got used to it [the *jeong* culture based on honorific culture and age difference], I kind of liked it... Friends who are a year or two older than me really took that seriously like we go out to lunch, dinner, or coffee, and they always pay for it. Whereas in the US, it doesn't really happen. I think US is a lot more individualistic than in Korea... When I was in Korea, I definitely felt like people are trying to take care of each other. Sometimes it could be a little frustrating just how strict stuff can be with age. That whole hierarchy and politeness... There needs to be a larger age difference in the US for that respect to kick in whereas in Korea, it's so immediate.

Greyson: The US doesn't have the same depth of traditions like for example, we don't have the formal and informal level of speaking. We have traditions here but honorific is something like so far beyond the way that we, most people, probably wouldn't be able to contemplate applying that... With the most recent *Park Geun-hye* scandal⁸, they have like millions of people would go on protest, and it doesn't get violent... I find that to be very admirable... I think a lot of it goes back to the honorific system.

One of the strengths about grounded theory is that ethnographers, based on participatory observation and interviews, get to uncover the specificities and nuances of what is below the surface of the expressed behaviors and interpretations that other researchers have not found. The wholesomeness of Korean popular culture frequently emerged from my observation of the KIG members when they talk about why they like Korean popular culture and how it differs from their popular culture. For example, I observed in our interactions that those KIG members who are younger than me would sometimes use some of the honorific Korean words, such as *unni* or *noona*, when speaking to me. They would also occasionally bow down to me politely as a means to exercise the honorific culture. Rosalie, a devoted fan of Korean culture, shares her thoughts:

⁸Park Geun-hye, a former President of South Korea, was impeached on 9 December 2016 for being involved in a political scandal. Her aide, Choi Soon-sil, who did not have an official position in the government, intervened to the presidency, exploited Park's power to seek donations of money from several business conglomerates, and accessed to Park's personal and work life to have directly influenced, and interfered with the policy of, the state council.

Rosalie: American pop culture seems a big mess to me. I'm not interested in "real housewives in New Jersey," whatever is on reality television... [There's] too much unnecessary drama [whereas] Korean culture is different. It seems more wholesome, honest. American pop culture, for these TV shows, I feel like the producers are trying to create conflict where there isn't any. It doesn't seem authentic. It's just too much violence. It's less humble at least as of right now. The way that Korean culture, there's definitely formality... When you talk to interviewers, you talk politely. In America, we don't really have formality levels.

The clean-cut image and content of Korean popular culture—K-pop, K-drama, TV shows, etc.—with a polished, modernized look motivates and appeals to fans in the US who are looking for something that may seem a little more innocent and naïve in the eyes of the general American public. I argue that the relatively clean-cut and innocent content of Korean popular culture can be categorized as wholesome. Anya, a K-pop enthusiast and music lover in her late 40s and a mother of two children, shares her thoughts:

Anya: One thing I really like about it [K-pop] is that American Hip Hop, rap, and pop, to some degree, the content has gotten more graphic, ugly, obscene, and female objectifying, and I feel like that K-pop, that's another appeal for me, because it's something I can also share with my kids. I don't let them listen to a

lot of American rap and Hip Hop because of all the content, sexually objectifying and defaming women. I find it much more appealing that in Korean culture, it doesn't seem to be accepted. I know that was a big part of why I found it interesting because I was finding it difficult as for someone who loves dance and music, and it's also good for my children. [K-drama] is not going to resolute with American because it's too naïve. But I think it's also nice to not have what has become reality in America. It's just too exhausting.

One of the examples of the clean-cut and innocent content comprising the wholesomeness of Korean popular culture is that K-dramas have a different tone and portrayal of affection. Almost all of my major informants said that, whereas it is a social norm to have sexualized and aggressive content in American TV shows, K-dramas focus more on non-sexualized and emotional relationships.

Rosalie: I can notice the big difference between American TV shows and Korean ones in the way they portray affection between the characters. Whereas in American television shows, there's a lot more skin, it's more sexualized, in Korean television shows, even just holding hands makes my heart racing. In K-drama, it's more about building relationships more than getting physical with the other.

TinTin: There's a show called Game of Thrones. Some people say it's a little too much because it gets very graphic. It's a very intense TV show. It's very violent. Also, it's very sexually promiscuous... [Also, American TV drama] never ends. I'd start losing interest after season 6. That's what I like about K-dramas. There is a beginning, and there is an end⁹. They don't keep dragging on and on and on.

Variety shows, which often get left out of analyses of Korean popular culture, especially the reception of Korean variety shows in non-Asian regions, are another appealing facet of Korean Wave for fans in the United States. The notion of wholesomeness is embedded in almost all forms of Korean TV shows and U.S. fans find that comfortably appealing as the shows seem less aggressive, more child-friendly, and somewhat naïve. In this regard, Iliana and J.C. share their thoughts:

Iliana: Variety shows in Korea are child-friendly. Growing up, I don't like inappropriate stuff. Sometimes it's too much. I just want to watch something nice.

J.C.: We don't even have variety shows here. We don't have that kind of culture where they pull the artists and do all these kinds of different things because I think our artists think it's really cheesy. Only a very handful of artists here would make fool of themselves on reality shows like SNL. As far as our culture has

⁹ Most K-dramas have about 16-20 episodes in total, and each episode runs about 60 minutes.

been, [violence and aggressiveness] has been our norm for a very long time. I think American culture is just very very sexualized from early age. It must be underlying cultural things. Here in America, sex has been normalized. It's not huge and taboo.

As I stated earlier, the Korean Wave fans in the United States find the content of Korean popular culture to be more innocent, clean, and child-friendly to an extent that they perceive it to be more wholesome. They appreciate Korean popular culture as they feel comfortable consuming it. For example, Anya shared her experience of attending K-pop concerts and how it differed from America in terms of alcohol and drug consumption at concerts.

Anya: Alcohol is served in American concerts. It's a very big thing too to also take their drugs. It's extremely rude. It was one of the biggest differences. Everyone was completely focused on the concert. I was so impressed that *Big Bang* [one of the K-pop groups] did all of their songs during the two and half hours. It was worth every penny.

Another significant cultural difference between U.S. and Korean popular culture is the notion of "cute culture" and different perceptions of the word "cute." Cuteness is an appeal to others; it invites others to engage in social behaviors including companionship, cooperative action, and communication (Dale, 2017). In the East Asian region, cute

culture has an overarching mainstream presence far more than in other regions of the world. For example, Japan's *kawaii* (literal meaning, "cute" in English) culture, Botz-Bornstein (2016) argued, can turn into a decentered form of soft power. Although the success of commercial products from Mickey Mouse to Hello Kitty shows that cuteness can easily cross national and cultural boundaries, there are key differences in specific linguistic usages (Dale, 2016). The English word "cute" is derived from a word "acute," which has negative connotations such as "cunning" and "shrewd" that are not found in Asian languages (Dale, 2016). In the US, some disdain the idea of "cute," such as "the creepy world of too cute" (Schoemer & Chang, 1995), cuteness imbued with aggression and violence meant to deceive (Ngai, 2012), and cute objects as sadistic (Harris, 2001). The cute culture in Korea, on the other hand, is much more mainstream and widely embedded in many facets of society to an extent that it has the connotation of happiness.

Greyson: Cute culture. I think for the most part it is a positive thing. It [*aegyo*¹⁰] is very much part of the culture that you don't even think about it. In Korean people, there's natural *aegyo*. That's part of the reason I like the language too. It's very prevalent in speaking too.

The boy group format used to be popular in the U.S. music industry in the 1990s and started to die out rapidly in the early 2000s (Anderson, 2014). On the other hand, the boy group/girl group format in Korea has had continuous appeal for several decades. One

¹⁰*Aegyo* refers to talking and behaving in extremely cute ways.

of the reasons that it was a passing fad in the US can be explained by the culture being individual-centric. The collective mentality of ‘we are not just members of a group, but a family’ in K-pop boy/girl groups is seen as attractive in the eyes of American fans.

Tiffany: It’s going to go up and down when it comes to the pop thing. In the US, boy bands come and go. But in K-pop, it’s been just continuous flow [for decades]. And they have been so successful that you don’t see it as a huge off and on like the US because the fan base just keeps growing internationally.

The hybridity seen in K-pop, for example, represents a great example of the fluid nature of popular culture in the era of globalization. Thanks to new information communication technological developments, such as YouTube and other social media platforms, the transnational success and expansion of K-pop has been boosted beyond Asia. The extremely clean-cut image and aesthetically pleasing K-pop performers and performances are appropriate for the digital age and the social media generation. K-pop distinctly appeals to fans in the US by exemplifying the world of pop culture as a total package: catchy tunes, good singing, attractive appearance of performers, mesmerizing performances, and well-thought-out merchandise.

Tiffany: I love the choreography in K-pop. In Korea, they have weekly music shows. Instead of just showing music videos, they have the actual groups perform on stage. In America, we have nothing like that [anymore].

Binzy: It was totally different feeling, different sound, different look. There's never a dull moment. There is always fresh music, which is so hard in America. There might be one good song in at least six months.

Iliana: They repeat the song over and over until you're tired of it. Unless you buy the album, you don't hear the rest of the music. But in K-pop, it's much easier to listen to all the music because they'll be on like *weekly idol*¹¹, *inkigayo*¹².

Leoy: [K-pop] Music videos, the production value of quality alone is just fascinating. They [K-pop content] have this story, character, and you can tell they put so much effort in everything. The styling, the set dressing, the clothes, the camera angles, and everything. It is an art, and I appreciate a hell out of that.

Cultural elements travel, get reinterpreted, and repackaged in a way that is more appealing and better received internationally. The way the Korean cultural industry creates and repackages various cultural elements is skillfully and carefully done. By strategically incorporating a wide range of music and choreographic genres, K-pop creates its unique mode of hybridity with extremely polished looks in non-threatening and pleasant packages.

¹¹A Korean variety show, varying from episode to episode, that features idol groups as invited guests and consists of several corners.

¹²One of the weekly music TV shows in Korea.

Rosalie: In America, we don't buy physical albums anymore. They just put it in the plastic case and that's it. It's a different story in K-pop. Although everything is digital in K-pop too, people still buy physical albums because they put more thoughts into its design and everything from the packaging of the albums to all the extra stuff [like photo cards and season's greetings (see figure 1)]. Fans are getting something they can't get digitally. It helps the whole fandom communities get larger and larger.

At one of the KIG gatherings, I casually mentioned the word “hybridity” when talking about K-pop. Anya seemed appreciative of the term devoid of the two notions—postcolonial mimicry and contemporary minstrelsy—that haunt Westernized notion of cultural appropriation (Oh, 2015b). She felt the word “hybridity” well explains and verbalizes how she views K-pop.

Anya: I like the word hybrid. There is a difference between exploiting culture and absorbing it. I think it's kind of an arrogant attitude to take that any particular type of music would not appeal to potentially every cultural type of person. Not everybody in that culture, but to deny the people in this group, ethnic group, racial group, gender group would not be interested in that music or shouldn't be because they are not the original is really counter to what I think music is. It should be something that brings everybody together and that connects

us in a way that we don't even always understand. I like the hybridization of K-pop because I also like that they [K-pop] wiped out the things [from American culture] that I consider negative.



Figure 1: Example of K-pop Album Package (Photo Credit: JYP Entertainment)

The theoretical approaches to the Korean Wave phenomenon tend to revolve around the notion of cultural hybridity that de-emphasizes the multiple subcultures of individual audiences and fandom (Anderson & Shim, 2015), which in fact, I argue, create complex power dynamics. One must not look at the notion of hybridity simply as a binary model—such as resistance/ domination and center/periphery—or a descriptive tool to explain certain transcultural phenomena of media culture. Hybridity is never a power-neutral space; it is a space where different power relations are continuously struggled and negotiated. The theoretical challenge, according to Kraidy (2002), thus resides in the following conundrum: In what context do social agents revert to a hegemonic deployment of hybridity? In what context does transnational hybridity un/consciously create ideological twists in global contexts? Under what conditions does transnational hybridity fulfill or not fulfill its progressive potential in a local context? I attempted to unravel transcultural dynamics in line with hybridity in a complex global context—in which Kraidy (2002) terms the ‘intercontextual theory of hybridity’—in regard to the Korean Wave phenomenon, particularly K-pop in relation to gender representation.

2.2 Gender Representation

The core distinctive characteristic of globalization theories from earlier imperialism paradigm lies in the “necessary complexity” (Sparks, 2007, p. 130) in which both local and global audiences play a pivotal role. The circulation and distribution of media texts via diverse audiences take place in the discursive form (Hall, 1980). In order for media texts to have meanings among diverse audiences, the discourse must be translated and transformed into social practices. The process of these practices creates

shared collective experiences in what Appadurai (1996) once termed the “deterritorialized mediasphere.”

Some cultural forms of media texts *appear* to be natural or universal rather than constructed. However, what seem to be global cultural meanings do not just become naturalized and universalized in the vacuum of power struggles. The process and operation of globalizing certain cultural meanings always take ideological effect and power hierarchy: hegemony. There is a pattern of ‘preferred readings’ or ‘dominant readings’ in the realm of hegemonic ideology; the domains of ‘preferred readings’ have the whole social order embedded in them as a preordained set of values, practices, and beliefs (Hall, 1980). However, this hegemonic ‘preferred readings’ is constantly confronted with oppositional struggles for hegemonic power is only made possible when there is resistance (Fiske, 2011).

These constant struggles and various forms of resistance between domination and subordination always happen in popular culture (Ang, 1985, 1996; Fiske, 1992; Hall, 1998). The cultural meaning of popular culture is semiotic excess (Hall, 1980) and does not carry only the dominant ideology. Therefore, texts of popular culture should be understood as an example of a moment of ongoing cultural negotiation and reinterpretation over meaning, symbol, and pleasure, which is at the center of everyday life and lived experiences. Hybridity occurs as local cultural agents interact and negotiate with global/international forms, using them as resources through which local people construct their own cultural meanings (Bhabha, 1994). It helps us to understand how

‘preferred readings’ or dominant ideology is reinforced or twisted by looking at the local audience’s reception of transcultural media texts.

Since the early 2010s, the contraflow popularity of K-pop in the US—especially among the digital native generation fueled by social media—demonstrates its much more hybridized form as ‘spreadable media’ (Jin & Yoon, 2014). A modern form of K-pop, with its rigorous idol training system¹³, which can be traced back to the 1980s-1990s, now has its own distinguishable cultural aesthetics and traits that international fans are familiar with, such as *kkonminam*¹⁴ or soft masculinity (Jung, 2011b), the K-pop training system, *aegyo*, certain styles of makeup, and outfits, just to name a few. One of the theoretical concepts to explicate the transcultural popularity and appeal of Korean popular culture has been male celebrities’ fluid gender representation and multiple layers of masculinity (Jung, 2011b). Despite a long history of patriarchy in most parts of the world, women (and men) have produced and maintained feminist movements in their everyday lives, as well as in public (Ang, 1996). One of the recent examples is fans’ active and pleasurable reception of the *multi-versatile masculinity* found in K-pop male idols.

K-pop uses skillfully hybridized concepts that reflect various layers of masculinity. When talking about K-pop male idol groups and their masculinity, mainstream media and casual observers in the West often make mistakes by looking at

¹³The K-pop training system is notoriously known for being intensely competitive and rigorous. K-pop entertainment companies hold auditions regularly and select only a few trainees. For often more than five years, they undergo rigorous training processes in singing, dancing, learning foreign languages, mannerism, etc. Only 20-30 out of 1,000 trainees ever get to debut (Lie, 2012), and only a couple of groups out of the 20-30 become popular.

¹⁴*Kkonminam* refers to males who are flower-like pretty.

them as a simple imitation of American male groups, such as the Backstreet Boys and ‘N Sync (Anderson, 2014; Caramanica, 2011). They use binary logic to describe K-pop male idols as either cute or tough, pretty or handsome, feminine or masculine, gay or straight, etc.; they often judge them as appearing too *feminine* and therefore appearing too homosexual, at least by interpretive standards in the United States. However, K-pop male idols do not manifest binary either/or masculinity, but a range of fluid multi-versatile masculinity that occurs simultaneously (Anderson, 2014; Jung, 2011b; Oh, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). This fluid, versatile masculinity reflects not only feminine masculinity, but also beast-like¹⁵ masculinity, cute masculinity, pretty masculinity, boyfriend-like masculinity, *unni*¹⁶-like masculinity, or *oppa*¹⁷-like masculinity. This strategically and skillfully hybridized multi-versatile masculinity can be seen in the K-pop male idols’ musical production, choreography, music videos, fashion, makeup, photo shoots, way of talking and acting, interactions with other male idols, or off-stage portrayals.

This multi-versatile masculinity of K-pop male idols is simultaneously hybrid, fluid, and transnational in which Jung (2010) explains as a renegotiated transnational identity and communicative process among diverse audiences. The multi-versatile masculinity represents an important aspect of the popularity of K-pop as transcultural fans identify it as part of the appeal of K-pop. Fans are attracted to and find *pleasure* in the multi-versatile ways K-pop male idols portray their masculinity; some focus on their

¹⁵*Beast-like* (*jimseung* in Korean) refers to male K-pop idol groups, which are portrayed as hunky, strong, and “manly.”

¹⁶*Unni* is a respectful Korean word used by females to call older females.

¹⁷*Oppa* is a respectful Korean word used by females to call older males.

talent and politeness while others focus on tough, wild, and beast-like images of masculinity portrayed throughout their music, choreography, fashion, and behavior. Others link K-pop's masculinity to their exceptionally beautiful *kkonminam* images (see figure 2).

Miranda: K-pop male idols wear makeup, and they always look like the most beautiful people in the world.

Binzy: They [K-pop male idols] look so good. So much is going on with the makeup and hair, and I just love that. I didn't feel like they were too feminine.



Figure 2: Example of *Kkonminam* (*flower boy*) K-pop Male Idol

According to Appadurai (1996), the collective experience of popular media culture creates solidarities of cultural taste among audiences from different countries and enables them to participate in a shared imagination regardless of nation-states. The transcultural traits of multi-versatile masculinity embedded in K-pop male idols enable their images, or media texts, to easily travel beyond national/cultural boundaries, especially via social media. The notion of soft masculinity is becoming more global as international audiences familiarize themselves with it. The pan-East Asian identity of *kkonminam* has crossed cultural borders not only because they are aesthetically pleasing enough to attract global audiences of popular culture, but also because its media text is increasingly spreading in the global “social mediascape” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Jin & Yoon, 2014).

Jung’s (2011b) theoretical concept of soft masculinity as a cultural form has gone beyond the transnational and has started to become a semi-global identity. There is less and less cultural discount found in K-pop as its characteristic of soft masculinity is becoming more transcultural and global. Interestingly though, it was not the Western societies, but East Asian societies that first commodified multiple masculinity, including soft masculinity, not just as a subculture but as part of the popular mainstream.

Leoy: [More fluid gender representation in K-pop is what] I really appreciate about in Korean pop culture that’s different from American pop. You take any American male group, they will not participate in half of the stuff the male group in Korea would do [such as] the *aegyo*, all of the Korean male pop groups that

dress up in girl group outfits in performances like that. There are so few American artists I can think of doing that or it would be less tastefully done. In Korea, it's done because they know it makes the fans happy and they are just having a good time. In America, I feel like if somebody in pop culture, who is a male dressed up like a girl, it would be more teasing. It'd seem like they're making fun of females.

The notion of soft masculinity is less prevalent and welcomed in the United States *perhaps* because of U.S. heterosexual males' fear of their constructed *ideal masculinity* being emasculated by such alternatives or because of the different perceptions U.S. society in general has toward cute culture (Dale, 2016). Multi-versatile masculinity well aligns with the reality of today's era passing from information age toward "a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience" (Dator & Seo, 2004). In this emerging era, hypermasculinity faces a considerable lack of legitimacy as delicate, sophisticated, and fluid soft masculinity increasingly gains prominence in everyday life. Therefore, many, mostly females, fans' fanatical craze for K-pop male idols is not something about which men should feel threatened or emasculated; rather, they should feel welcomed. What is disappearing is not masculinity per se but hypermasculinity as the *only* ideal masculinity. I see soft masculinity as liberating men—for example, men crying—rather than threatening or emasculating them. Greyson, a male K-pop fan in his late 20s, shared his thoughts:

Greyson: There is something that I very much hate about American culture and it is the ‘I have to be hypermasculine’ thing. I feel like that’s [men wearing makeup, dressing up, doing *aegyo*] very much more acceptable in Asian culture in general. I think it’s great... So we, we meaning Western men, have had it beaten to our heads since birth that you have to be this stone booth of statue of no emotion. If you show an emotion, you are weak and saying stuff like ‘Don’t be like a girl.’ Showing any sort of vulnerability is seen as weak. I’ve had a depression issue for a long time. It’s a part of my personality. I was self-medicating watching K-dramas because a lot of it was an identity issue revolving around Western—you have to be a robot—type, you can’t feel things as a man.

J.C.: [Men crying] is not off putting at all because it shows there is emotion. That’s definitely American thing—hypermasculinity, not showing emotions.

This notion of fluid soft masculinity can be found not only in K-pop male idol groups, but also in K-dramas.

Leoy: Emotion is not innately feminine. It’s innately humane. That’s one thing that’s very different in K-pop and K-drama... I do not think that they [male celebrities in Korea] look feminine. They might be pretty, but I don’t think that it makes them feminine.

Anya: I feel like Korean dramas are very innovative in a way. I think they allow both men and women to be more vulnerable in different ways and even more completely as characters in American movies and cultures are. The men don't have to be macho masculine. There is a clear distinction. There is definitely different vulnerability portrayed.

The transcultural identity of *kkonminam* has been referred to as the pan-East Asian identity (Miller, 2006). This is because the transnational images of *kkonminam* are highly popular among non-Korean-Asian audiences by transcending national and cultural boundaries and reflecting the hybridized cultural form of soft masculinity. However, these unique transcultural images of K-pop in East Asia are becoming more and more recognized beyond Asia. The *kkonminam* image of K-pop as spreadable media texts has clearly influenced the contemporary constructions of an ideal masculinity in East Asia and is starting to influence the West (Jung, 2010; 2011b). The global K-pop phenomenon shows that global fans—mostly females—recognize, accept, and enjoy different images of masculinity exhibited by K-pop male idols. Women deconstruct the dominant hegemony of masculinity and defy what ideal masculinity—which was set by heterosexual White male power in patriarchal society—should be. Those who are tired of hypermasculinity prevalent in American pop culture get to decide and reconstruct what ideal masculinity means on their own terms, for example, by considering *kkonminam* or soft masculinity as another attractive masculinity instead of perceiving Asian men as too *feminine*, and therefore homosexual, to be sexually attractive.

A distinctive difference between K-pop male idols and Western pop artists is that, unlike Western male musicians, men are not hesitant to dress up, do *aegyō*, or dance in extremely “feminine” and gender-bending ways while being extremely humble and modest. *Kkonminam* masculinity of K-pop male idols is particularly interesting for its consequential ideological twists in the Western sphere. This soft masculinity has developed not because males have become feminized, but as a consequence of the deconstruction and the hybridization of female/male sexual identities (Kim, 2003). Female K-pop fans find ways to express, define, and enjoy their desire for their own measures of masculinity through K-pop male idols. Although soft masculinity is a context-bound perception and is only a partial picture of the whole ecology of transcultural Korean popular culture, it nevertheless provides women an alternative and fluid way to choose what ideal masculinity means to them.

J.C.: They look softer than the men we have here. Soft masculinity [the term I once used and explained to J.C.] was something you [referring to me] were exposed at an early age. But now that I’ve been into K-pop, I expand the idea of what attractiveness can be. I think now my idea of ideal masculinity has changed because before I’d have said ‘tall dude, muscles, being huge and bulky.’ But now it’s changed. Now I think I don’t have a single ideal masculinity. It can be fluid.

Binzy: The way I talked about humbleness. That kind of act [soft behavior, not about the physique] would be interpreted as ‘man up!’

In addition, the economic power of single women in their twenties and thirties who demonstrate a high propensity to consume entertainment and cultural products has drastically increased in some parts of the world since the late 1990s. Soft masculinity in K-pop male idols closely relates to the changing reality of a capitalist society as women are gaining more economic, social, political, and cultural power. Soft masculinity in K-pop represents how capitalism can work with feminism, and how capitalism works through feminization of mass culture by taking women's pleasure of fantasy seriously. Fantasy is created within reality and reflected on reality. The proliferation of multi-versatile masculinity in the American sphere is an actualization of one of the multifaceted political pleasures of women (and men to some extent). The ethnographic data I collected and analyzed for more than two years provide a pattern. I frequently noticed that the U.S. K-pop fans find pleasure in their fluid encoding/decoding of K-pop male idols' soft masculinity. Some members of KIG—mostly my major informants—and I would frequently ask one another which K-pop idols we find attractive, handsome, pretty, etc. We would compare and contrast our beauty standards and talk about our perceptions. Sometimes there was overlap and sometimes there was not. Seen in this vein, “the politics of pleasure”—a main theme that started with romance reading and soap opera reception in the West (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984)—provides ideological twists to the hegemonic-imposed masculinity in the context of American fans' reception of K-pop male idols and their multi-versatile masculinity.

Leoy, not only a K-pop enthusiast but also a lover of Korean language and history, once told me that it is true that K-pop male idols seem to be crossing gender boundaries more freely and seem to present a wider range of masculinities than the seemingly more rigid boundaries of masculinity in the United States. However, Leoy and other informants often emphasized that there are distinctions in terms of beauty standards between the two cultures. Korean popular culture seems to have a more rigid idea of what is not attractive. One of the reasons, I argue, is because Korea, one of the most racially homogenous countries, lacks diversity and multiculturalism in many facets of its society and culture for its unique historical reasons. Its understanding of diversity is different from that in the United States, one of the most racially diverse countries. Because Korea and the United States do not share some particular historical contexts, I found *disjunctures* in the realm of cultural appropriation as I explored the oft-contentious topic.

2.3 Cultural Appropriation

On a global level, liminal masculinity of K-pop male idols and Korean male celebrities provides fans in the United States a space where they can negotiate an alternative to normative White masculinity in the West. However, American fans' reception of K-pop male idols does not necessarily lead to breaking the status quo of racial power relations. Increased visibility of K-pop does not necessarily lead to increased understanding of Korean-ness on the global stage, just as increased visibility of Hip Hop does not lead to an increased understanding of Blackness/African American-ness on a global scale either.

K-pop male idols' ethnic identity or racial status is often fused with that of Asian Americans in the US, and their non-Asian American Korean-ness is often made invisible (Oh, 2015b). One example can be found in the ways in which some Americans have certain expectations of K-pop idols who appropriate Hip Hop in their musical production and styles. Arguing whether a certain cultural form is purely authentic or hybridized should not be the primary focus because, to some degree, all cultures are hybrid in today's contemporary society (Bhabha, 2004; Kraidy, 1999; Straubhaar, 2007). Viewing a certain cultural form as postcolonial mimicry (Poole, 2013; Yang, 2012b) or cultural hybridity (Oh, 2014; Ryoo, 2009) lies in the eye of the beholder, which is un/consciously and in/evitably political (Phelan, 1993). As I analyzed in Chapter Two, the postcolonial mimicry perspective implies that there is an original, authentic authorship one culture can claim over another culture (Manning, 2004; Oh, 2014, 2015b).

Understanding cultural appropriation, as well as the perception of ethnicity surrounding the practice, is bound to have differences based on historical context (Lipstiz, 1998). This is well manifested in K-pop. The ways in which the K-pop industry and self-producing K-pop idols appropriate Hip Hop is sometimes not done in the way in which African Americans would expect foreign cultures to understand it. When popular culture is circulated transnationally, the local context of its origin is often erased and instead it is projected through the lens of the receiving local context.

For example, *Kwon Jiyong*, who is more well-known by his stage name G-Dragon (GD), is one of the members of K-pop boy group *Big Bang*. He is a popular mainstream K-pop artist who selectively appropriates and modifies Hip Hop in his

musical styles. In 2013, he painted his face with black, red, and white for a photo shoot to symbolically express the idea of revolution while promoting one of his albums, *Coup D'etat* (see figure 3).



Figure 3: A Photo of GD Allegedly Doing Black Face
(Photo Credit: Seoulbeats.com)

Some American audiences misunderstood and thought that he was using black face and making fun of the Trayvon Martin case. YG Entertainment, the company that represents GD, responded that their understanding was misleading and completely taken out of context (Seoulbeats, 2013). However, given the rising global cultural influence of K-pop around the world, K-pop artists may need to consider the increasingly diverse communities on its receiving end: the international audiences and fans. They also may need to anticipate that if they perform in what would culturally be considered blackface in the US, it will probably create controversy. This case leads to critical questions about cross-cultural misunderstanding of cultural appropriation and how bodily representations can be differently understood depending on cultural and historical context.

Should we distinguish K-pop's appropriation of Hip Hop from those of White Americans or Asian Americans? According to Oh (2015b), we should because we need to consider the different sociohistorical contexts that un/consciously inform our understanding of cultural appropriation. K-pop performers' appropriation of Hip Hop sometimes prompts outrage and misunderstanding among American audiences who believe that Korean Hip Hop is a form of contemporary minstrelsy¹⁸. One may argue that if GD were an Asian American, he would be more knowledgeable about the American minstrelsy tradition, and he would likely avoid the black makeup. This perspective continues to project that because Koreans neither have had a tradition of minstrelsy like the US, nor been colonizers, they are not necessarily knowledgeable of the history of African American slavery, racial politics, or representational issues in the US. The fact that K-pop idols have U.S.-influenced musical styles does not necessarily mean that they are knowledgeable about the U.S. historical contexts that created minstrelsy. Some may argue that the U.S. audiences' reading of K-pop as minstrelsy (Poole, 2013; Yang, 2012b) demonstrates that they project their own colonial history and racial politics on K-pop.

However, I contend that the argument has two sides. Just because Korea was not a historical imperial power and does not share the historical context does not mean it cannot become a strong global cultural power now, one that needs to be aware of, and be responsible for, the consequences of its commercial industries. Another example is *Kim*

¹⁸Contemporary minstrelsy or modern-day minstrelsy is often embedded in popular cultural forms that perpetuate certain stereotypes toward Black/African Americans that are offensive to modern sensibilities. The essential premise is its portrayal of Black/African American life and culture through masquerade (Harbord, 2015).

Namjoon, a member of K-pop boy group BTS (*BangTan Sonyeondan* in Korean), who is better known by his stage name Rap Monster. During a performance in 2014, he used the N-word while rapping, which led to a great level of outrage among international audiences, especially Black/African American K-pop fans. J.C., an African American K-pop fan, told me during an interview that she sees him as having appropriated African American culture with musical styles and other representational elements such as his hairstyle. She feels he should have done more research and been more aware:

J.C.: Do I think he [*Namjoon*] has culturally appropriated? For sure, maybe in the beginning when he was appropriating Black culture, it was in a very stereotypical way [like] afro hair. I don't give anybody a pass, I'd never give a single person in the entire world a pass for saying the N-word, especially somebody who is taking portions of [African] American culture and making it their own. If you're going to take [African] American culture, and if you're going to do that, you need to do a little of research.

Also, the fact that *Kim Namjoon*, as well as other prominent K-pop artists, is fluent in English may also lead international audiences to believe that their grasp of American culture—African American history in particular—is on par with their language skills. Some members of KIG remarked that *Namjoon* knows English, and he seems to have caught up with Western trends. My informants' reception of the issue is that the K-pop performers, who appropriate Hip Hop and Black culture, should show more

sensitivity to Black/African Americans. As Phelan (1993) noted, increased visibility is not equal to increased power for those who are subordinated as visibility has dual functions. Increased visibility of K-pop does not necessarily signify the visibility of Korean-ness in the US. This is because ontologically, a Korean body cannot be fully understood through the gaze of Americans—mainly general audiences or casual onlookers—who conflate the Asian body and its subjectivity with Asian American stereotypes. The American audience's expectation reveals that Korean identity is likely conflated with Asian American or their identity as Korean is invisible from the gaze of the American perspective (Oh, 2015b).

Increased visibility of K-pop and Hip Hop in a global context does not provide a deepened understanding of each ethnic group, which is one of the limitations of the cross-cultural exchange of popular culture at a superficial level. As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, when popular culture is circulated across borders, the local context of origin is often erased and instead projected through the lens of the receiving local context. As the two examples above suggest, people in the United States (both White and non-White) and Korea (K-pop idols, cultural industry, and the general public) project and see themselves through their own eyes, maintaining the status quo in their own territories rather than trying to understand each other's culture.

Racialized perception often limits the readability of hybridity embedded in Korean popular culture. Invisibility of cross-cultural readings occurs not just through the inability or disinterest of seeing other's histories, but also through racial politics. K-pop is unreadable as long as the two ideologies are projected—postcolonial mimicry and

contemporary minstrelsy—that haunt Westernized notions of cultural appropriation (Oh, 2015b). Both Korean and U.S. audiences exclusively engage in seeing themselves, projecting their own histories and perceptual lens onto the cultural products with which they engage. A lack of linguistic and historical knowledge and understanding results in the invisibility of others’ cultural practices. By not recognizing others’ particular contexts, both audiences project the mainstream ideology of their own society. I neither attempt to criticize Western-centrism nor claim authentic Korean-ness. Instead, through a critical reading of each audience group’s cultural assumptions and specificities, I suggest a different discourse for U.S. as well as Korean audiences, which would hopefully lead to a better understanding of each other’s culture and history in order to appreciate and respect the Otherness of each culture as well as subcultures. The goal is to contribute to a practice of mutual responsibility and reciprocal sensitivity to other cultures in this global era.

As I sought to unravel the highly complicated realm of cultural appropriation in conjunction with transcultural K-pop, as I observed and interacted with the members of KIG, and as I analyzed the data, a critical point emerged. Hip Hop, which originated with African Americans in the US, is different from the historically pervasive White popular culture in the US because it was a form of grassroots movement at its beginning. It did not start off as a form of capitalist-driven commercial popular culture as many modern commercial popular cultures have. “Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged” (Hall, 1998, p. 453). In the specific U.S. context, African American Hip Hop was more than a musical genre in the

beginning; it was a site for African Americans' resistance against the oppressors and struggle for and against a culture of the powerful, the White Americans. J.C. and TinTin, both African American K-pop enthusiasts in their late 20s, share their thoughts:

J.C.: I think there is a definite clear separation between being White American and being Black American. Being American in itself and being Black. Although Black people are American, for the most part, Black people have still maintained our own separate culture because we had to, because we were segregated. We were discriminated against, so you had to create your own thing that had nothing to do with White people. There was no massive intermingling of White people and Black people because of the segregation that was going on in the world from the time Black people have been here until you can even say right now. There is still that segregation, which influenced the way our [Black] culture is created versus the way that White culture was created in America. There's all these things that Black people have created all the way from slavery time to here that have crossed over not Black to White but White to Black where White people have been like 'Oh what is that. Let's take it. Let's appropriate it.' Never like 'Let me share this with White people.' Because I feel like in this time frame of history, we've already had so much taken away by White people, we need to have things that are just our own.

TinTin: When I first started watching K-drama, I did research myself. K-pop Hip Hop aspect, not necessarily all Korean people, but those who, idols, this is how I feel about idols, idols should know, should do some research, I feel, on the Black culture because I can tell a lot of them want to identify with it... If they do a little bit of research, they can figure out blackface is not a good thing to do... I believe that they should have someone there who can say 'Okay. That's not good. Don't do that'... [In this regard] America is horrible when it comes to stuff like that. I've heard so many different racial slurs. Like on a TV show SNL [Saturday Night Live] here, they do the same things here because it's a comedy... I used to watch SNL growing up. But when I became more culturally aware of things, I realized it's blatantly racist right there.

When I once unconsciously referred to jazz as Black music to Rosalie, she explained to me how music has been racialized in the US. In the U.S. context, Hip Hop has been categorized as Black music, rock as White music, and K-pop as Korean/Asian music. Although the racial politics constructed in the US do not apply to Korea, and Koreans do not share that particular history, it is still necessary to be careful and sensitive when appropriating a culture that is from a historically oppressed group of people. Black people have been oppressed and, to a great extent, still are, albeit not as blatantly as before the 1960s. They had to create their own culture to keep and protect them from the White oppressors because a lot of things have been stolen from African American culture—and other minority cultures—without being given credit. They are often made to

seem as though they are newly discovered when in fact they are being exploited. U.S. racial politics can be applied to media cultural context in Korea and work in a positive direction. One of the reasons for Koreans' lack of understanding in the historical background and context of Hip Hop culture derives from the lack of diversity in Korean media.

J.C.: Korean people do not have the same history with Black people that White people do. If you look at it from two different ways, one of them is kind of surface and another one is kind of deep. The way general [White] people feel about Black people is deeply rooted inside of them because it's been something that has been passed on to them generation to generation. So the way that Korean people as a whole society feel about Black people is a little bit more surface because they're getting it from media input, White media input, that portrays Black people as this sucky people... So I'd find it's easier for them, the feelings about Black people to be flipped, changed, because they don't have those same deep visceral feelings about. It's the *entitled*. White people are very entitled because they've always had the upper-hand and so they don't understand what it's like to have lower-hand... They [Black people] may understand the underline context that this is the only media that they [Koreans] have been presented about Black people the same media White people perpetuate here in America and they export that out, so that's all they [Koreans] are going to know. That's why my offended-ness is not deep-seated offended-ness with Korean artists as it'd be

with White artists. The N-word is not part of Korean history. It's not taught, and the true definition is not easily accessible in Korea.

Claiming pure cultural authenticity legitimizes and reinforces certain global power hierarchies in postcolonial contexts. It bases its logic as if one has a right to claim authorship over cultures that should be considered fluid elements, reflecting the inevitably multidirectional flow of hybridized cultural contexts in contemporary society (Kraidy, 1999; Straubhaar, 2007). However, as I examined earlier in Chapter Two, hybridity is never a power-neutral space, but is a space where different power relations are continuously negotiated and struggled through. In the specific case of African American Hip Hop, it started off as a form of grassroots movement: a resistance and struggle against oppressors (Hall, 1998). Cultural appropriation can enhance diversity and multiculturalism derived by mutual understanding. However, one should be sensitive to a culture that has a history of being colonized or oppressed. To quite a few outsiders, K-pop looks like global mainstream culture, another well-off, neo-colonial, global export power appropriating African American culture. The increasing influential effect, the scope and scale, and the significant number of non-Korean international audience (both Black and non-Black) of K-pop around the world give K-pop other layers of reasons to be more sensitive and considerate when appropriating Hip Hop.

Mutual understanding toward transcultural media texts and cultural appropriation as well as the perception of ethnicity surrounding the practice is bound to have differences and difficulties based on varying degrees of social, cultural, historical, and

political contexts. There can be a myriad of causes perpetuating certain cross-cultural misunderstandings and a lack of contextual adequacies. Online sites and global social media, such as Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Netflix, etc., have initiated and facilitated the transcultural—and to some extent global—popularity and spreadability of Korean popular culture. Ironically though, the notion of immediacy—the unfathomable speed and spread of information—one of the traits of social media, sometimes causes a limitation that perpetuates cross-cultural misunderstanding.

2.4 Global Social Media

Without a doubt, the Korean Wave phenomenon has been facilitated both in scope and speed due to the development of information communication technologies, especially social media and YouTube. To many K-pop fans in the United States, YouTube was the platform that first introduced the world of K-pop. Then other various platforms of social media such as Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, Wikipedia, etc. have exponentially facilitated the spread of Korean popular culture. Social media is a vital conduit for American fans' reception and understanding of and exposure to Korean popular culture. Fan/user-created online sites and social media platforms drive international fans to the world of K-pop and other facets of Korean popular culture that are foreign to them. These platforms are the core foundation of connection between Korean popular culture and international fans:

Iliana: When I first got into K-pop, I didn't know about companies and stuff [the mechanisms of K-pop industry] like that. So when I wanted to watch more *SHINee*'s [one of the famous K-pop groups] videos, it was under like SM Town

[one of the mega K-pop entertainment companies that manages a K-pop male group *SHINee*]. I was like who is this SM Town. I didn't know about the concept of companies because in American pop, it doesn't seem like they do that. They have their own YouTube accounts like *Justin Bieber Vevo* [Me: Then how did you get to know? Where do you get your information?] The internet. I started following a bunch of people on different social media like Tumblr. I have almost every social media, and I follow 1,800 different people on Instagram.

J.C.: I think that's what helps facilitate. YouTube wasn't huge huge when I first got into K-pop [in 2007]. It was harder for me to get information [back then].

Tiffany: K-pop has kind of been around [before social media], but the access wasn't as great. So you couldn't communicate with everyone else to show that you have the same fandom. Right now, when you are on the Internet, 'Oh, I'm in the same town. I love the same thing as you do.' So social media brought up all the same interest people to gather and meet. Back in the day, I am like sending hand-written letters, asking friends in Korea 'Send me more [K-pop stuff].' Compared to now where we can totally have a free access to get to K-pop.

YouTube has been referred to as the most important platform for K-pop content to cross the borders and to be consumed by international fans (KOCIS, 2012). However, I argue that other social media platforms and online sites are equally as important as

YouTube for the digitally connected transcultural fans in the US. They are not mutually exclusive, but symbiotic, and work for different purposes. KIG members, including my informants, seemed well equipped with digital devices such as smartphones, laptops, high-speed Internet, etc. My informants and I would sometimes visit each other's homes to watch K-pop-related videos or the end-of-the-year performances on a big screen television. When watching K-pop music videos or other K-pop-related videos, my informants often use YouTube. When posting and sharing their fanart work, they often use Instagram or Tumblr. To follow and get updates of the most up-to-date photos taken by *fansite masters*¹⁹, they visit Twitter. When consuming daily news about K-pop, they use Facebook as well as other social media platforms and online sites. When looking for more in-depth information about the history of K-pop groups, to learn more about certain words and phrases K-pop idols use, and to know more about the companies their idol groups belong to, they go to Google and Wikipedia.

J.C.: Wikipedia is huge. Most of the time, it's Wikipedia. Even though people say Wikipedia is not reliable because other people can edit it but for the most part, it's very accurate from what I've seen. That's kind of a person I am. I am very knowledge-driven, knowledge-hungry. I want to know about things. I'd see

¹⁹Fansite masters (or homepage masters as known as *homma* in Korean) are one of the unique parts of the K-pop fandom culture. They are very well-known among the fandom and the idols themselves and are extremely dedicated to their idol group/member. They follow their idols' official schedule and take extremely high quality photos, often even better than official merchandise. Fansite masters share their photos on their Twitter account, and they have as many as 400,000 followers. A lot of new fans are drawn to the idol group/member due to these images spread online.

them talking about this, or I'd hear them talking about this, and I'd be like 'Oh, let me Google that' because I want to know what it is.

TinTin: Right now I'd say between Tumblr and Twitter [are the ones I use the most]. They are very informative. YouTube is where I go to for where I know what I'm looking for. YouTube is a final one [when I am like] 'Okay, I want to watch this music video.'

Iliana: When I was into [Japanese] anime, I didn't talk to anybody on the Internet at all about anime but then when I got into K-pop, there were so many people who would comment on my stuff [Iliana posts her fanart—drawings dedicated to K-pop idols—on her social media accounts and shares with other fans (see figure 4)] and then we end up having a conversation.



Figure 4: Example of Fanart
(Photo Credit: Iliana)

Appadurai (1991) once predicted that the unprecedented flow of media, culture, economy, and people in the *deterritorialized* world would create certain *disjunctures*. Although global social media and its open access have facilitated unprecedented cultural exchange, they have simultaneously facilitated cross-cultural misunderstanding: the *disjunctures*. In the era of globalization, a disjunctive moment occurs in the transnational flow of culture. Culture, distributed by global social media, facilitates the invisible moment and thus creates superficial understanding because the Internet is limited in how it provides embodied experiences of each culture (Oh, 2015b). Complex modern histories and intricate layers of ethnic identity configurations in both Korea and the US are often made invisible—as I examined in the earlier section on cultural appropriation—by the incessant flow of information on the Internet and social media. In this vein, the fact that U.S. audiences can easily access K-pop anywhere and anytime via social media and search Korea on the Internet does not necessarily mean that they are aware of Korea’s complex modern history and the intricate configurations of racial, ethnic, and national identities since the colonial era (Oh, 2015b).

Although global social media potentially enables increased access to foreign cultures, its immediate nature creates limited—somewhat superficial—ways of knowing for international audiences (Ess, 2009). In the era of global social media, gathering information is easy. However, with the lack of embodied experiences to create direct context with another culture and with the lack of historical understanding of each other, embodying deeper knowledge demands a considerable investment of time and effort.

Although social media opens a wide range of opportunities to access a foreign culture, the only thing it can offer is a mediated experience, the incomplete fracture of mediated pictures over a screen. Disjuncture and cross-cultural misunderstanding occur in a transcultural flow due to the lack of time and effort invested, including disembodied experiences, language barrier, and the dearth of understanding the sociohistorical specificities of foreign cultures.

Among the various layers of *disjunctures*, the language barrier—a lack of understanding of the Korean language—seems to be a substantial limitation to gain deeper knowledge. For instance, whereas agents in Japanese global popular culture, *manga* (comic books) and *anime* (animation), are not human, agents in Korean popular culture explicitly embody bodily, racial, and ethnic visibility as live humans. K-pop idols and actors in K-dramas are real humans, and therefore, their interaction on TV variety and reality shows is relatively less scripted and more interactive, demanding higher proficiency in the language. This gives U.S. fans of Korean popular culture a limited embodied knowledge, understanding, and experience. Although my informants seemed careful to not generalize and believe everything they see on social media, there were instances where misunderstandings occurred for their lack of understanding of the Korean language. When those disjunctive moments occurred, they often asked me via *Kakao* (a Korean messaging app) or in person. Leoy once shared her personal worry that her passion for Korean culture might look superficial because of her lack of understanding of the Korean language.

Leoy: I don't feel like I get to experience the full intensity of Korean culture. I don't feel like I get as authentic as experience without the language. You don't get to experience unless you learn the language instead of having somebody telling me it's this, this, and this. I'd like to experience fully so that I can come to my own conclusions. You find camaraderie when you find someone who speaks the same language as you and you are able to communicate. It's more personal, it's more real human interaction. I like that human interaction aspect of it.

Anya, a mother of two children, and J.C. also shared similar feelings:

Anya: The language barrier is a huge issue for me. It's one of the many reasons we [she and her children] started taking Korean lessons to better understand the songs, lyrics. It [learning a foreign language] doesn't come to me as easy as it used to. I hope they [translators] translate it decently... Even if it is not well subbed, at least it gives me the idea of what they are doing. Also, you can watch people's body language, tone of the voice. It is too frustrating to not understand the bulk of it. But at the same time, I don't want to be one of those Americans who expect everything to be in English.

J.C.: I want to learn the language because it'd be nice to know exactly what they're saying without having to *Google*.

Nevertheless, transcultural fans understand and deploy the objects or texts of another culture through the means they have at their disposal within their own contexts: the centrality of locality (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). Even though Korean Wave is inextricably tied to the people, culture, economy, policy, and politics of Korea, the primary site of concern for non-Korean fans is their own locality and its cultural milieu (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). As media increasingly becomes implicated in intensifying patterns of distribution and dissemination through digital media, I find that these convergent transcultural contexts are becoming increasingly global in scope: for example, the use of K-pop vernacular words like *oppa*, *maknae*, *hwaiting*, etc. The need for greater local contextualization of the complexity of social media and transcultural media and fans is a valuable contribution to the existing literature of global media studies. I argue that any consideration of the ways in which the chaotic forces of globalization play out in a fandom should proceed from our informed understanding of fan behaviors, motivations, and meaning-making processes driven by affective pleasures and investments.

3. EMOTIONAL PROXIMITY IN TRANSCULTURAL KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE

Korean entertainment industries indulge themselves in maximization of profit by exporting their products to the largest number of audiences possible, which is seen as a capitalistic strategy justified in the name of national interest. Some (Kang, 2015; Lie, 2012) argue that Korean popular culture is mainly about profit-driven commodities and a national-institutional campaign. I see such an argument as problematic for it neglects a critical fact: Korean Wave is profoundly dependent on overseas fans. Also, the political-

economic-driven approach downplays deeper sociocultural and political implications that transcultural media and fans generate.

The mechanisms of the pleasure (Ang, 1996) American fans find in Korean popular culture should be taken seriously. As commercial industrial products, producers have to have certain ideas of what the audience will find pleasurable, so that they can attract consumers and make profits. The strategy that producers of modern popular culture employ is directed at the elaboration of what they already know about popular pleasure. In the U.S. context, what Korean popular culture seems to be particularly good at is skillfully formulating and constructing this capitalist-driven strategy of hybridity to arouse a feeling of nostalgia: what I call emotional proximity.

Hills (2002), borrowing Paul Willis's (1978) theory of cultural homology as a means of discussing the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, argued that the idea of this symbolic fit to analyze the transcultural affinities of self-identified Western and Japanese *otaku* (obsessive fan) who share a common devaluation as fans within their own popular cultural contexts that both operates through and exceeds nation-states. Chin and Morimoto (2013) also argued that transnational fan orientation may at times supersede national, regional, and/or geographical boundaries. This concept frees fandoms from the constraints of national belonging, reinforcing our contention that fans become fans of transcultural texts or objects not necessarily because of where they are from, but because they may recognize a subjective moment of emotional proximity regardless of origin. This is not to say that the nation is unimportant; national identity is still an important layer of identity for most people. But it is *one of* a constellation of

possible points of emotional proximity upon which transcultural fandom may be predicated. Nation-based differences or similarities may well appeal to people across borders for being exotic, foreign, and new, but so might other affective investments in popular cultural texts such as characters, histories, language, and the presentation of interpersonal interaction (Chin & Morimoto, 2013).

This analysis was also found in my study. Rosalie, a dearly devoted fan of all things Korean, once told me, “I’m shy to say I like K-pop because I’m afraid that other people might judge me.” Members of KIG have expressed how they have to explain their love and interest in Korean popular culture to earn justification from other people in the US. It is in this process that U.S. fans of Korean Wave constantly negotiate with their identity and form multiple identities that are always inherently dynamic in the realm of transcultural fandom. It is not an abandonment of their nation but an encouragement to revisit their nation in a new direction.

Soft power, as a descriptive concept, encompasses multiple facets as discussed in theoretical terms in Chapter Two. The way Korean Wave exerts soft power in international contexts differs from the way historically imperialist countries do²⁰; Korean popular culture is seen as less threatening in the eye of the beholder because Korea historically has never invaded or colonized any other countries (Hong, 2014). As I

²⁰There is a growing literature on the soft power of emerging cultural, economic, and media powers—known as BRICS—which consists of five countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (Straubhaar, 2015). However, my dissertation mainly focuses on the case of Korean popular culture. According to Jin (2016), Korea has become one of the top non-Western countries that meaningfully exports almost all forms of its culture, such as television programs, film, popular music, animation, digital technologies including online gaming and smartphones—not only as technology but also as culture—to both Western and non-Western countries. There have been several countries that have penetrated the global markets with their cultural products, but they primarily export limited cultural forms.

examined earlier in Chapter Two, because Korea has been considered an in-between 'semi-periphery' (Ryoo, 2009) on the global sphere, Korean Wave can find a niche and reposition itself as a cultural mediator in the midst of global cultural transformation that leads it to a 'sub-Empire' (Chen, 2000) status. In the realm of global popular culture, especially in Hollywood, the major players have been Caucasian with some Black/African American figures. Asian performers have seldom become major players with very few exceptions. Hogarth (2013) views Korean Wave as a reaction and a challenge to Western-dominated global popular culture. K-pop and K-drama have distinct Asian physical features no matter how hybridized they are. Joseph, a fan of Korean food and K-drama in his early 30s, thinks that although Korean popular culture has American influences, it is still distinctively Korean in terms of having Asian physical features and dramas reflecting traditional Asian values and ethos. He states in this regard:

Joseph: When I look at Korean popular culture, even though they have a lot of American influences to get it going, they made it their own. It's theirs, it's not ours. The way they do it and their passions come from their culture.

K-dramas reflect traditional Asian values and ethos, which makes Asian audiences feel culturally proximate and some Western audiences feel emotionally proximate. The Korean Wave fills a large demand (Jin, 2016) and void (Anderson & Shim, 2015) for audiences of both the East and the West that were desperately waiting for clean-cut, non-aggressive, and less sexualized content. Binzy, a second-generation South

Asian American, expressed how she perceives herself as neither 100 percent South Asian nor American. She struggled as she sometimes found both American and Indian culture unrelatable. Then she found K-pop and other facets of Korean popular culture that are Asian but not too Asian, which made her feel more comfortable:

Binzy: For me, it's like the combination of being raised as South Asian and also American mentality. That's why I say I'm more American because I'm very more toward open-minded, accepting, so for me, Korean culture is like a nice combination of both.

The Korean Wave works as a mediator not only in Asia, but also in the West. In other words, the Korean Wave brings American people with different racial/ethnic/social/cultural backgrounds together by creating shared emotional proximity. As I explained in Chapter Two, the way fans—in this case, Americans—find certain foreign popular cultures—in this case, Korean—attractive and pleasurable lies in their previous experience (Ang, 1985, 1996; Hills, 2002). The carefully structured way of touching and arousing a certain feeling of affinity with highly modernized and hybridized looks can be understood as what I call *emotional proximity*, another layer of Straubhaar's (1991) cultural proximity theory. It has been known that Korean popular culture reflects the traditional Asian values and ethos, which makes Asian audiences feel culturally proximate (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Hogarth, 2013; Shim, 2006). What is interesting is that its skillfully structured layers of hybridity *comfortably appeal* to Western audiences,

associated with a notion of appreciation, not exoticization. It works as a mediator not only within the East, but also in the West by filling a large demand and void (Jin, 2016) for audiences who were looking for clean-cut, non-aggressive, less sexualized, and wholesome content.

The skillfully hybridized Korean media texts provoke a certain emotional proximity among Americans, which also ironically encourages them to rediscover their own identity and culture. What one perceives and feels as more culturally proximate does not necessarily relate to their linguistic or geographical proximity and nationality.

Rosalie: [I prefer K-pop than American pop music because] I think it has different *feel* to it, and I can relate to their music more. The feeling is different. Korean culture is different [as opposed to American culture]... K-pop artists are great performers making audience *feel* what you're trying to portray. Off stage, they are cute and polite, even the rappers. But here in the States, they're just the same person on and off stage. They [Korean popular culture and K-pop artists] seem more authentic to me.

The transcultural fans of Korean Wave in the US that I have interacted with for over two years have identified their interest, passion, support, and love for Korean popular culture not as *exoticization*—looking upon the East with a postcolonial gaze and constructing it as curious and bizarre—but as *appreciation* and as something their culture can learn from.

Leoy: If you are going to appreciate anything from any culture that's not yours, please be at least slightly conscious of the culture from which it is coming from. You gain an appreciation for the culture not just the material. The lack of conscious—I don't even know how to say it. People need to try a little bit harder to understand where the things they are consuming come from. This entitled mentality of 'I get to consume your goods without any consideration'... It's this level of entitlement like 'I deserve to consume your goods but I don't have to give anything back. I don't have to put any effort to understand where you are coming from.' There are a lot of people who might just go into listening to K-pop or whatever without trying at all to learn about where the music is coming from and that endangers cultural appropriation. It could be like fetishization. That has to be careful. It has nothing to do with culture or the people who are producing it. It's just the fact that it's exotic. It worries me that people who don't bother to appreciate K-pop or whatever [K-culture] anymore than just surface level.

Whereas the Japanese industry consciously made it “culturally odorless”—making products that are not distinctively Japanese—in an effort to universalize products (Iwabuchi, 2002), the Korean Wave emphasizes a hybridity of formats with localized content and appeal (Jin, 2016; Ryoo, 2009), maintaining the cultural specificity or Korean-ness of the content. Unlike Japanese animations and comic books, K-pop and K-drama possess explicit cultural odor in terms of the agents who are associated with the

country's bodily, racial, and ethnic characteristics. In other words, the people in Korean media represent physical human features of the people of the country of origin as well as images of its nation, and these agents with Korean ethnicity physically appeal to international audiences, which have come to appreciate them. The transcultural fans' reception of Korean popular culture, not as exoticization but as appreciation, may help break certain stereotypes constructed toward East Asians, especially men.

Rosalie: Asian men in K-pop and K-drama are portrayed as real people as opposed to how they are portrayed in American media. They are not type-casted into these roles that perpetrate false stereotypes. I hate how American media portray people with color in certain stereotypical ways. It's hard for me to watch American TV sometimes because I know it's not true. American mainstream media is so white-centric mindset. We're still trying to keep people in this box because that's who is filling the bill. Who has the money... That's what content is getting served... Keeping people out of ignorance, reinforcing the stereotypes.

Angie, a fan of K-drama, shares her thoughts in a similar vein. She thinks that watching K-drama has helped her break the stereotypes she had toward East Asian men, which were perpetuated by mainstream media in the US. In the mainstream U.S. media, the portrayals of non-Whites are structured in ways that support its dominant ideological power—heterosexual, White, middle-class men (Chambers, 1997; Dyer, 1997; Oh, 2015b).

Angie: Before I watched Korean dramas, I did not tend to find Asian men super attractive. [Me: why?] I know exactly why that is: media exposure. We don't have attractive Asian men in our media, and the ones we do have are typically nerdy and thin like a smart tech guy. I think that in American culture, it's structured in such a way that it benefits White men. White men can make Asian men not as attractive by being like 'Oh they are so feminine,' and that bears out in our media. So when I started watching Korean dramas, I was like 'hol* sh**.'

Leoy: Asian males are just not presented anything other than nerd, sidekick, or parody in America. We have no Asian male leads in films or TVs at all. That increases the lack of exposure people get because in our American, Western pop culture, there is so very little Asian portrayal as attractive. There is so very little Asian portrayal at all. Institutionalized soft racism. It's not aggressive. It's just there and nobody breaks the status quo.

The popularity of Korean popular culture among Americans is bound to have social, cultural, and political ramifications. I contend that American fans—both non-White and White—find this very complex layer of hybridity in conjunction with the polished and modernized look in Korean popular culture *comfortably appealing*, associating it with a notion of *appreciation*, not *exoticization* (Said, 1978), to an extent that they may consider the people in Korean popular culture as a *third race*. This debunks

the dichotomous logic of race and gender structured in the West and the prevalent stereotypes of Asians portrayed in American mainstream media. In this vein, the popularity of Korean Wave among White deeply “*messes with*” (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015) long-held racial and colonial superiority and imperialism, theoretical concepts explicated earlier in Chapter Two, driven by Western modernization in the global sphere.

All modern cultures are hybrid to some extent, thus, hybridity cannot be the sole attribution of Korean Wave’s popularity in the United States. Interestingly, the well-received hybridity of Korean Wave may reflect Kraidy’s (2002) theory of intercontextual hybridity, examining the dynamics of transnational culture by articulating hybridity and hegemony at the nexus of global and local. The favorable reception of Korean Wave shows what Americans have been missing in their own media. One of my close informants, Anya who is a mother of two children, expresses her thoughts:

Anya: What has become reality in America, especially with the aggressiveness and violence, is just too exhausting. It wasn’t like that when I was growing up, but that is everywhere now. It just gets worse and worse. And I find it much more appealing that in Korean culture, it doesn’t seem to be accepted. I appreciate that they make the effort to put this out as something to be emulated, encouraged, and followed. They are glorifying good behavior. I think that they are pretty genuine to who they are. They are not trying to be shocking, and they are very sweet. And that is more appealing.

TinTin: It's very similar to Black/African American culture too. 'Hey brother what's up. Hey sister what's up' [to someone] we may not know. It's very polite. I think it's polite to me this is older woman you may not know but you call her *ahjumma*²¹. I like that. I like that a lot. It shows a very close culture, and I love that. That's like what really highlights Korean culture for me—how close it is to African American culture. There is no rudeness. That's one of the things that kept me there... The kindness is still there because there is not enough of that in the world. In the US, there is not enough of kindness really. Individualistic. Only care about myself, my family. I need this for me. I don't see that in K-drama.

The complex level of hybridity in Korean popular culture reflects the argument that hybridity ironically encourages local people to revisit and rediscover what they have neglected or forgotten (Kraidy, 2002; Ryoo, 2009). The high level of hybridity in Korean popular culture arouses emotional proximity among not only Asian audiences but also American audiences to help them realize what they have been missing in their relentless drive toward modernization and capitalization during the past several decades: the *woori-ness* (we-ness in English). This simultaneously complex yet fluid hybridity and emotional proximity embedded in Korean popular culture, I argue, transforms into one of the multifaceted soft power, which appeals to U.S. fans.

²¹An intimate (sometimes, not always, depending on the context) Korean word to refer to a married or marriage-aged woman who is not actually related to a family.

4. SOFT POWER OF TRANSCULTURAL KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE

4.1 *Woori-ness* as Alternative-Post-Western Soft Power

It might be argued that soft power is just another implicit method of imperialism (Schiller, 1991) or propaganda because power relationships in globalization often remain highly unequal (Appadurai, 2016). While I agree with much of this assessment, it can also be seen as overly simplistic for neglecting sociohistorical factors that are always complex-and-context-bound. Soft power is not equivalent to propaganda, but it is related. It, however, differs from propaganda in that it puts human interaction up front and its core agent is the interactive public (Snow, 2012). Unlike propaganda, which retains a negative connotation in democratic societies, cultural diplomacy has elicited less controversy as it is perceived to be a more persuasive instrument of foreign policy, one that is not coercive but soft, and one which is conducted by states in conjunction with private actors as well as civil society groups (Nye, 2011).

I acknowledge that soft power is often overshadowed by hard power, such as military and economic power, in international relations and world politics. However, an important fact is that the public, not necessarily state-related agents, can be a source of soft power by allowing them to form their own resources distinct from or even against official policy in pursuit of the public good. There is a particular notion that can be associated with the Korean Wave phenomenon: the *woori-ness* (meaning we-ness in English), which signifies the unity of a collective mindset. I argue that this unique Korean notion of *woori-ness*, which is deeply embedded in Korean popular culture, can be traced back to the historical formation and building of the nation and the people of Korea. The

notion of imagined communities of nation-state (Anderson, 1983) may apply to both Korea and the United States. However, Korea followed a different path from the way America's nation-state arose originally (Ryoo, 2004). Korea's long history going back thousands of years, national unification, and relatively homogeneous ethnicity have been the fundamental means of survival throughout various historical phases— industrialization, modernization, democratization, and globalization. Korean history from the *Koryo Kingdom* (918-1392) throughout the modern era, such as its geographical location surrounded by powerful nations, the Korean War, and military dictatorship, has created this *mythical norm* that only by being together as *one* can we survive (Ryoo, 2004). Therefore, Korea's *woori-ness*, at the expense of individualism, was a way of surviving and it brought Korea to its status as a semi-global power and sub-Empire (Chen, 2000) in the 21st century.

If people's sense of collective identities and attachment to their communities are understood as real, historical, and widely shared and are combined with their collective memories and lived experience, then the community differs from being an invented or imagined political community as Anderson (1983) once theorized. Whereas Anderson's main point focuses on the invented or imagined nation and nationalism through the enacted shared experiences of mass mediation, Schlesinger (1991) emphasizes the importance of history: "history actually works behind their backs as the real transformer of the world" (p. 163). This does not minimize the cultural or ideological aspects of the national experience, but rather, Schlesinger attempts to distinguish the view of ideology as a structure of lived experience from the view of ideology as mere false consciousness.

National identity, which is different from nationalism, may be in place once the political boundaries of the nation-state have been achieved and can be understood in its more affirmative and constructive sense without necessarily embracing nationalism. Imagined nation and community legitimizes oppressive state power and conceals structural social injustice in order to sustain the traditional national culture supported by cultural imperialism. In contrast, national identity must merge with democracy. Ignatieff (1994) supports this idea:

The only reliable antidote to ethnic nationalism turns out to be civic nationalism, because the only guarantee that ethnic groups will live side by side in peace is shared loyalty to a state. The cure for the ills of nationalism is no longer the chimera of internationalism, therefore. It can only be a different sort of nationalism (pp. 100-102).

Nationalism per se is not the problem; the real problem is the *kind* of nation (Ignatieff, 1994; Narin, 1995). The concept of an imagined community simply cannot be directly applied to the people of Korea and the case of Korean nationalism. The two Koreas—one ethnic populace but two states (South and North) on the same peninsula—reflect a historical formation different from the one proposed by Anderson. According to Kang (1999), the Korean populace continued as a national unity, and even today's political situation of divided Korea is relatively insignificant from the perspective of Korea's 5,000-year-long history. Korea has greatly suffered due to its geographical proximity to formidable countries.

Ryoo (2004) argues that what provided security to Korea was not the geographical location, but the idea of unified ethnicity. As a culturally homogenous population in a relatively small area surrounded by more powerful countries and societies, Koreans have managed to sustain their cultural and national identity. First, in the face of China, then the brutal Japanese colonial period, followed by the powerful influences of Americanization, Koreans have remained whole by preserving a distinctive Korean identity. In spite of continuous attacks from neighboring countries, factional politics of the *Chosun Dynasty* (1392-1909), and corrupted contemporary Korean politics, Korea as a culture and people survived a long history through shared lived experiences rather than just imagined (Steinberg, 2002). Choi (1996) contends that civic nationalism helps harmonize democratic and peaceful impulses and can be an alternative path to national unity for Koreans who suffered the most extreme violence of the Korean War. These notions of civil nation and nationalism offer an alternative path to sustain nation and nationalism while minimizing the dangerous risks of ethno-nationalism (Ryoo, 2004).

The formation and building of Korea's nation-state followed a different path than the United States. First, the formation of the Korean nation and its collective identity is the result of a truly long history. The history of clear geographical and economic boundaries, homogeneous ethnicity, common language, and a dynastic system in place since the unification of *Shilla* (57 B.C.-A.D. 935), *Koguryo* (36 B.C.-A.D. 668), and *Baekche* (18 B.C.-A.D. 660) has formed a real, comprehensive identity, including the experience of inter-regional conflicts and foreign invasion (Park, 1996). Second, Korean

nationalism, unlike that in the U.S., is mainly characterized by anti-dictatorial movements that criticized military governments. Throughout the struggle for democracy, national unification—*woori-ness*, the one-ness—has been a symbol for democracy (Jang, 1999). The relatively unified picture of Korean-ness was formed in specific historical and geographical conditions; its unique notion of *woori-ness* was formed before specific national communities were imagined or modern forms of nation-states emerged (Ryoo, 2004).

Whereas the form of the Korean Wave is highly hybridized and transnational, the driving force behind it, ironically, is homogeneous and unified. Miranda, who is in her late teens, once told me that people are so divided in the US by race whereas in Korea, it is, seemingly, just one. Greyson, Joseph, and Rosalie share their thoughts:

Greyson: On a grand scale, Korea as a whole, it is a tight knit country because [of Korea's unique together *woori-ness*] whereas in the US, everything is extremely individualized.

Joseph: In Korean popular culture, they have strong roots and they have pride in their culture. They are proud of who they are. We [Americans] are proud of ourselves but not so much at national level. We've got some [historical] roots but it's relatively short compared to Korea.

Rosalie: This [*woori-ness*] is the driving force behind all the success and today's global phenomenon of Korean pop culture. And they are not selfish about it either. I was watching Korean news one day and they are helping other countries. Korea is like the second country in the world sending out aids to other countries. Korean culture is very much about community and collective society as 'we are one'... It's not *we*, it's *I*; it's *my* house, it's not *woori* [our] house as in Korean. And that mindset is one of the main reasons why Korea went from being one of the poorest countries in the world [during and after the Korean War] to what it is today in such a short time. There is no way that if we [America] had gone through something like that, we wouldn't be there in the same amount of time because everyone is for themselves and not for each other.

One of the unique K-pop traits American fans identify with and enjoy is what I term *playful hierarchical relationships* derived from Korea's *woori-ness*; there is a specific position attributed to each member based on age in most K-pop idol groups, such as *leader* (usually the oldest member in a group) and *maknae* (the youngest member in a group). The notion of age difference is socio-culturally less important in the US where fundamental individualism dominates; in Korea, it is one of the most important aspects. Korea's age-sensitive culture creates a rigid hierarchy yet also creates a feeling of collective integrity that it is *we*, not *I*. This top-down hierarchical relationship based on age becomes a *playful and admirable element* for American fans, working as a soft power. For example, some of the female informants and members of KIG, who are

younger than me, would sometimes call me *unni* (a respectful and intimate Korean word used by females to call older females) to play with the hierarchical relationship based on age while wanting to share a feeling of intimacy. When watching K-pop-related videos on YouTube or browsing K-pop-related media texts on social media, members of KIG would often say something like “*maknae on top*” to refer to the youngest member of a K-pop group who dare to talk to his *hyung* (a respectful and intimate Korean word used by males to call older males) or her *unni* impolitely.

American fans are drawn to the Korean Wave and find Korea’s unique cultural aspect of *woori-ness* as a path to globalization fascinating. Fans of the Korean Wave in the US find a strong sense of community and belonging—the *woori-ness*—in which they have been missing out in lieu of glorifying other things. They are not abandoning their American nationhood and national identity, but rather acknowledging and embracing the lost sense of community through their interaction with Korean popular culture. For example, Anya says:

Anya: [What Americans are used to is] just the most horrible, sexually assaulting things. It makes me feel like I’m losing my country, and I’m looking for other cultures that are doing this better. They [K-pop artists] are championing the good behavior [that is] modest, kind, and considerate. People could say that K-pop and the K-culture is just sort of an escape from reality. But I think it’s also its own reality chosen to be promoted that’s more positive and modest. There is a different level of integrity that I don’t find in my American culture... That is what

I like about the behind the scenes [of K-pop reality shows]. They are not trying to be shocking, they are very sweet, and that is more appealing... As long as there is something that's been released for the public, this is the image their company wants to portray, I totally know that. But I appreciate that they [Korean popular culture] make the effort to put this out as something to be emulated, encouraged, and followed.

Glorifying good behavior of modest, humble kindness in conjunction with *woori-ness* of communal mindset portrayed in Korean popular culture works as one of the multilayered facets of soft power in the Korean Wave. American fans of Korean popular culture appreciate this *woori-ness* in Korean culture because they feel that they are being acknowledged and respected by their beloved stars.

Iliana: Also, idols [singers, artists] in America don't have enough shame I think. In Korea, they are very—it seems like—they care a lot about honors, so there is not a lot about scandals. It's usually dating scandals but that's about it [which wouldn't be a scandal here in America]. They are very respectful over there. They care about their actions to us fans, us looking up to them... I love the friendliness.

TinTin: They're just so humble, so talented. When it comes to American culture, you don't see a lot of rappers realize the reason why you are there today is

because of your fans... Some people are like ‘why do you like K-pop so much?’ because they are so humble. They are still realizing ‘I’m not in this position today like if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be here... Every single concert, every single *V app*²² they do, every single social event they do, they always say ‘we’re here for you guys. You guys are the reason why we are here.’ I am being acknowledged, and that’s what I love... The reason why [I like Korean culture] is because it’s a culture that seems so proud of everything. It’s on a level that I almost want to be a part of it. For my own culture, my own being here in America... We are not together. We don’t have that togetherness culture. But in the Korean culture, I can see that. I can see that people saying like ‘We will do this. We will fight this. We are going to stand together. We are going to do this together.’ [Me: like the impeachment of former President *Park Geun-hye*?] Yeah, exactly. Everything that was going on with that was like wow, this country literally came together and just said ‘No, no, no, this is not right. This is not how we do things here’... I thought that was very refreshing, very refreshing to see that there’s still a place out there that does that. That’s why I’m like ‘I want to be a part of it.’ I want to be into that [the togetherness of it].

Rosalie expressed her fascination with *woori-ness*:

²²A social media application that lets us watch the personal broadcasting videos of Korean stars.

Rosalie: The togetherness [*woori-ness*] of Korea and its [popular] culture is not ethnocentric because they are not saying this is better than yours. They are like ‘We’re all together in building up a better future for all of us, not just some of us. [Korea’s *woori-ness*, its nationalism] is not ethnocentric because they are not saying ‘We’re better than you’ but ‘We work together to make something better.’

The Korean Wave is not reinforcing another facet of ethnocentric imperialism, but is suggesting a *different kind* of nationalism and modernity in the name of *woori-ness* as three actors collaborate together: state, market, and people. Even the artists and stars often claim themselves to be an “entertainment-diplomatic complex” (Kim, 2013) and are considered the most treasured national assets. Unlike the typically heterogeneous U.S. experience, the Korean nation-state and cultural/national identity are made tangible because they are negotiated, shared, and articulated by the more homogenous people as a means to survive for nearly 5,000 years (Ryoo, 2004). National unification—the *woori-ness*—at the expense of silencing individuals’ freedom has been a symbol for democracy in Korea in contrast to the individuals’ freedom and diversity in the United States. This national and cultural feeling of *woori-ness* is infused throughout Korean popular culture.

Leoy: So much of what makes K-pop great is its *Korean-ness*. Even if you took the same beat and tried to make the same songs in America, they wouldn’t be the same. There is something about the way that—this music is produced and the members of the groups how they interact with their fans and everything—carries

distinctively Korean feel. There is a lot of Western music taken at best inspiration and at worst copies. What turns into K-pop, I mean K-pop in and of itself is Korean. It comes from Korea.

Theia: I honestly have to believe that the popularity of the Korean Wave in the world has a lot to do with their pride in their nation as a whole. There is a unity there. It definitely helps to promote the culture and the country. Korean people take pride in the Korean Wave phenomenon. That's definitely the fantasy world you just have to believe.

I argue that this relatively coherent *woori-ness* can be seen as one of the multifaceted layers of soft power in the eyes of non-Koreans, especially in Western societies where national unification and sacrifice have been relatively silenced for the sake of individual freedom. It is important to remark that although soft power can only be made possible with substantial hard economic power, it is not always guaranteed. This is where Korea's *woori-ness*, derived from its historical position of in-between 'semi-periphery,' comes in, working as an alternative post-Western soft power in international settings.

4.2 *Woori-ness* in Transcultural Fandoms

The *woori-ness* embedded in Korean popular culture spills over to the fans in the US who also get to experience the feeling of *woori-ness* through Korean popular culture, and most of all, through its unique fandom culture. The rise of idol culture in the Korean

cultural industry is closely bound with the construction of idol fandom, creating the needs for fans—the loyal customers—instead of satisfying and targeting the larger audience. Hence, the idol fandom is involved as a part of the idol group production system (Kim, 2015b). The everyday involvement, participation, and communication between fans and idols is much more interactive and close than American celebrity/fandom culture (Kim, 2015b).

Fiske (1992) contended that “there is a constant struggle between fans and the industry, in which the industry attempts to incorporate the tastes of the fans, and the fans to ‘excorporate’ the products of the industry” (p. 47). Fiske’s idea does not apply to the case of K-pop (Kim, 2015a). There is more collaboration/negotiation than struggle/tension between the industry and fans, and the management companies make efforts to stay on good terms with K-pop fans, treating them as adjunct producers (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015). Fans’ collective participatory activities via online sites and social media have had important influences on the formation of the K-pop idol industry and the closer relationship between K-pop idols and their fans in Korean society (Jung, 2012; Kim, 2015b). For example, fans have significant power in choosing which K-pop idol trainees get to debut as a K-pop idol group via online voting, and they sometimes will remove a member from his/her group for being involved in a scandal. K-pop idol fans often construct their idols’ public image through donations and other philanthropic activities (Kim, 2015b). The interpersonal relationship between idol and fan is more interdependent and symbiotic than in the U.S. musical fandom scene.

Leoy: Honestly, I think that everybody would be happier if they lived their fan life the way Koreans, and fans of Korean music in particular, live theirs. I think it does have to do with the sort of “we culture” in Korea versus “me culture” in America. I think that not everybody in America needs other people to be a part of their enjoyment of something they enjoy. Especially with K-pop, I get so much more out of it when I get to enjoy it with other people, and I don’t feel like Americans have the same idea... Because I feel the K-pop artists make an effort to make us [fans] feel closer to them... The concept of being connected because they are more thankful. I think that’s a very genuine response. I think there is mutually beneficial nature to K-pop artists and fandoms.

This *woori-ness* bears out in K-pop fandoms in the US as well. K-pop fans in the US are from different backgrounds, but they all come together. They exercise and experience the very notion of *woori-ness* of Korean culture on their own throughout their reception of K-pop. When talking about K-pop, the members of KIG often expressed how they feel much more connected to their idols, fandom culture, and the overall K-pop world. When my informants first got into K-pop, they were impressed and fascinated by how multicultural K-pop fans are in the US.

Iliana: K-pop has opened so many different cultures, like you meet so many different people and cultures through K-pop... When I went to my first K-pop concert, after the concert I had this whole conversation with this girl from

Germany. And we talked more after that. I met so many people. Korea is very based on being *with* people. Americans are very independent, but Koreans seem to be a lot more like *woori* [we]. The friendliness of everyone in Korean culture like the idols are very friendly with the fans, the people are very friendly with each other.

Tiffany: It feels so unified when I am at K-pop concerts vs. American concerts. That's why I was saying before how age and ethnicity doesn't matter. When you are at the show, you are all together, you're all there to talking about your *biases*²³, you're all there to literally enjoy what you're about to see... K-pop fans in Korea are really united. They come up with their fan group name, fan chants, fan group donation, and fan group color [see figure 5]... It's just in K-pop. Fan chants are there in a specific spot in a particular song. In the US, it's more like girls screaming, and there's no on-point chant. There's more unison in K-pop fandom.

²³ "Bias" among English-speaking K-pop fans means a favorite member of a K-pop group



Figure 5: K-pop Fandoms' Practice of *Woori-ness*: Each K-pop fandom has its own fandom color, fandom name, etc. to show a unified support for the idols. Shown here are different fandom colors for each K-pop group: white fandom color for a K-pop group Exo, pink color for SNSD, pearl aqua green color for SHINee, etc. (Photo Credit: Twitter user NheSica)

The Korean Wave and its fandom culture, which has the largest fandom size worldwide according to the Guinness Book of World Records (Anderson, 2014), provide a good example when trying to explain why and how popular culture matters in larger social contexts. What makes Korean popular culture transcultural and global, and thus the term Korean Wave, are the often-neglected intellectual and collective crafts people: transcultural fans (Choi & Maliankay, 2015). The media convergence and the development of communication technologies have enabled audiences to shape their media engagement and participatory culture in a greater variety of contexts on their own. This has been particularly evident in the study of fans (Jenkins, 2006; Kim, 2015). Fans of the Korean Wave have been among the first to create opportunities to do participatory

and creative work that is centered around the notion of *woori-ness*, creating what Appadurai (1996) called the “shared collective experiences in mediascape” on a global level.

K-pop fandoms’ participatory *woori* culture is transnational, and to some extent, global. They do not stop at just consuming and enjoying audiovisual media texts, but are increasingly participating in creating, distributing, and sharing forms of K-pop as spreadable media via social media (Jin & Yoon, 2014; Jung & Shim, 2014), from simply leaving a comment on social media to creating their own YouTube channels to post K-pop reaction videos²⁴ (Oh, 2017) and K-pop cover dance videos²⁵ (Noh, 2015). The peer production of subtitles—fansubbing (Hong, 2013)—and translations for those fans who do not know the Korean language is another example of fandom culture that can be applied Korean fandom’s *woori* culture. While the mainstream media are unable to provide fans in the US with the prompt cultural and linguistic translation of Korean content, fans translate and circulate Korean media texts, especially via social media (Jin & Yoon, 2014). Some of them further participate in sociocultural events such as fund-raising, donating to charity, volunteering in emergency situations, and even building schools for those in need under the name of their K-pop idols.

Members of KIG partake in this shared participatory *woori* culture. TinTin and Iliana have been doing amazing fanart—drawings and paintings of K-pop artists—and have shared their work with other fans on social media, such as on Instagram, Facebook,

²⁴ K-pop reaction videos are those in which people, mainly on YouTube, self-film their reactions to K-pop music videos.

²⁵ K-pop cover dance videos are those in which people, mainly on YouTube, film their dance to K-pop choreography.

and Tumblr. Anya, who is an excellent planner, has created and organized various events related to Korean culture, such as playing a *Yut Nori* (traditional board game in Korea) and a Korean food themed potluck party, just to name a few. My favorite regular KIG gathering has been K-pop dance class. J.C. and Leoy, K-pop choreography enthusiasts, have led K-pop dance class every other week for the members of KIG. We reserve a room at a public community building for about 2 hours. There are usually about 10 members who regularly attend the K-pop dance class, including myself. Some of them would show up to the class and other KIG gatherings, such as going to K-pop concerts together, wearing K-pop costumes they bought online or made themselves. Binzy is particularly crafted in this field. She makes multiple K-pop or Korean popular culture themed T-shirts, wears them, and sells them to raise fund for KIG. I thought wearing K-pop costumes was interesting. Whereas Korean K-pop fans in Korea do not really wear costumes, I often saw K-pop fans in the US, including KIG and my informants, wearing them to various events related to the Korean Wave, such as KCON²⁶.

5. TRANSCULTURAL LEGIONS OF THE KOREAN WAVE IN THE GLOBAL SPHERE

5.1 Transcultural Fans' Yearning for Cultural Capital and Validity

In the earlier section on cultural appropriation, I argued that increased visibility of Korean popular culture does not necessarily lead to an increased understanding of Korean-ness in the eyes of American audiences. Also, increased visibility of K-pop in a global context does not provide a deepened understanding of the cultural, social, or

²⁶ KCON is an annual Korean Wave convention held in different locations across the world.

historical intricacies of Korea. However, I argue this is not always so when it comes to individual fans rather than the general audience, and in this case, the fans of Korean popular culture in the United States. One of the traits that distinguish fans from general audiences is the level of investment—how much one is willing to invest. Bourdieu (1984) described culture as an economy in which people invest and accumulate capital. The cultural system distinguishes between the privileged and the deprived, and promotes certain cultural tastes and competencies, particularly through the educational system, but also through other institutions such as art galleries and museums. This socially and institutionally legitimized culture is referred to as official high culture (Fiske, 1992). Popular cultural capital, on the other hand, is not typically convertible into economic capital although there are cases where popular cultural capital overlaps with official high cultural capital. Acquiring popular cultural capital will not enhance one's career nor will it produce upward class mobility as its investment payoff. Its payoff lies in the pleasures and esteem of one's peers in a community of taste rather than that of one's social betters.

Fans, then, are a good example of Bourdieu's (1984) "autodidacts," a group of people who self-teach and often self-acquire knowledge and taste. Fandom is a peculiar mix of cultural determinations. It is an intensification of popular culture which often differs from official culture while expropriating and reworking certain values and characteristics of the official culture to which it is opposed. Fans are active producers and users of such cultural capital. Fandom offers ways of filling cultural deficiencies and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that accompany cultural capital. Earlier, I talked about how global social media can be a double-edged sword for its immediacy and

somewhat superficial embodied knowledge and experience. This is where the U.S. fans of Korean Wave differ from the general audience. The degree and depth of investment is not the same between those who casually prefer Korean food and those who seek out, actively participate in fandom culture, and endeavor to learn more about the culture.

Leoy: There is a difference between their [audiences] casual enjoyment and my passion. I don't know why and it throws me off. But I think they all kind of work together. I love Korean food, I love Korea music, Korean drama, films.

J.C.: It's confusing to Americans unless you do some research. You have to definitely learn the terminology so that you are able to understand. You have to have that will to keep investing and interested, liking it more than just a superficial level.

Transcultural fans of Korean popular culture in the US have a certain yearning for building their cultural capital as a means of appreciation and validity. One of the significant attempts they partake in to build their cultural capital is seen in their endeavor to learn the Korean language. Similar to official culture, fans' yearning for knowledge and information acquires an unofficial cultural capital that is a major source of self-esteem within the peer group. What is interesting in the case of the U.S. fans of Korean popular culture is that their yearning for cultural capital is to attain validity among not

necessarily their peer group—in this case, other American fans—but in the eyes of the general Korean public and society.

Leoy: I don't want to put the all the owe-ness of the communication on the Korean person to have to only speak English to me. I want to be participant in our cultural exchange. I don't want to feel like I am a burden to the culture that I respect greatly... I find it to be exceptionally selfish. [I want to learn the language] because I want to play a role and show that I am trying to give something back to the culture and community that I enjoy so much. I feel like there is a cultural insensitivity to this stuff that's produced in [Korean popular culture] that's not just being handed out for your pleasure without your understanding of where it's coming from. I feel like people have to try, at least just a little bit.

KIG has been holding Korean language lessons once or twice a week. For about three months, I taught them conversational Korean once a week; I perceived it as a great opportunity to help them bond with Korean culture more in depth. Almost all of the 14 key informants are K-pop and/or K-drama fans except Sean who is mainly interested in non-pop-related Korean culture such as history, language, and politics. Out of the 14 key informants, five of them had lived or are currently living in Korea for three months to five years. Two of them speak somewhat fluent Korean, and the rest the informants know *Hangeul*, the Korean alphabet, basic grammar, and speak a few words and phrases.

Although no one has forced them, they have consistently showed me a certain determination and yearning to learn the language.

TinTin: I have been so into the culture, ‘Okay you watch so many dramas, you are into the music, you do all the stuff about this culture. You need to learn this language because I’ve immersed myself into this culture so far you need to start learning this language because at this point, it’s being rude.’ I’m being arrogant, ignorant. I’m purposefully making myself naïve about it, ignorant about it... It has become a part of my identities. I need to learn the language. This is going to be a part of my life.

J.C.: I want to learn the language because when you go to the country, you can communicate in their native language. It’s definitely about respecting the culture that you like so much.

Miranda, who moved to Korea last year to attend a university and speaks fluent Korean, told me that one of her motivations to learn the Korean language was to enrich her experience and mutual understanding. In the winter of 2016, Rosalie visited Korea for a few weeks for the very first time. During her stay, she told me how she sometimes felt frustrated not knowing the language and because of that she yearns to go deeper by learning the language to have a more direct interpersonal experience with Koreans. By enriching her cultural capital, she feels like she is opening up her mind to the rest of a

world that completes her identity. Their yearning for validity from the general Korean public, in addition to their peer non-Korean fans, is one of the aspects where transcultural media and fandom turns into a whole ecology.

5.2 Ecology of Korean Popular Culture to Transcultural Fans

The way Korean popular culture, especially K-pop as a gateway, has boosted international fans to exercise and practice multiculturalism in global/international contexts is different from traditionally powerful countries because, for one thing, Korea does not carry the colonial burden as I explained earlier. Korean popular culture's soft power in world politics differs from traditional First World countries because Korea as a nation has not been an oppressor and colonizer. Its unique role works as a mediator, comfortably appealing to people around the world to get to meet, experience, and enjoy diverse cultures.

Korea has become the first non-Western country that meaningfully exports almost all of its cultural forms to both Western and non-Western countries (Jin, 2016). Since 2010s, K-pop has worked, especially for the young digital generation, as a gateway for international fans to open their cultural boundaries and be exposed to the *Other* culture. One trait of Korean Wave is its expansion. One may start being interested in K-pop and then expand their interest to other segments of Korean culture, such as K-drama, TV shows, films, history, food, or language. TinTin, Rosalie, Greyson, and J.C., who are all considered part of the digital generation in their late 20s, share their thoughts.

TinTin: I listen to K-pop more [than music from other countries] because there are so much coming out. There is not a lot of J-pop going on. It's kind of fizzing out a little bit. [I don't participate in Japanese pop culture] as much as Korean culture because those who like Japanese culture are heavy anime-influenced ones. That's not what I want to talk about [all the time]. I want to do other things.

Rosalie: K-pop may segue into learning about the language, the country, its role in international politics, sending out aids. I hope a lot of people who get into K-pop end up [expanding their interests and learning about other aspects]... Because here in America, we are just so easy to stay in our bubble in our own little world... We don't know anything about other countries.

Sean: From my perspective, as somebody who has a lot of interests in Korea but doesn't have much interest in pop culture is that a lot of people, I think, all they know about Korea is K-pop and the Korean Wave and they don't know about all the other history, politics. I'm a lot more interested in what's going on with *Park Geun-hye*'s impeachment or North Korea than what's the latest *Big Bang* album. And I think a lot of people get so focused on the pop culture and [TV] drama that they don't know about the rest of the things in Korea and you know there's a lot—not that Korean pop culture isn't important—but there's a lot more to Korea than just that... But I do think K-pop is a good way to open the door... I think K-pop is the thing that kind of gets them in the door.

J.C.: I think that's how most people that first started with K-pop would get into other areas of it because idols do branch out and do other things. And once they start doing other things like you'd be watching a drama and them eating this food and you're like 'Oh what is that?' I think it helps a lot when idols sing for a drama and you hear it and wonder what the drama is like. And I think that's how you really really get to see some of the cultures too.

Global cultural studies demand that we risk making some broader claims about the relationship between micro ideology and micro experience. Carey (1975) encouraged communication researchers to make macro claims from micro matters by studying media use as particular rituals creating ecology. Global/transnational media ethnography, with its base in local practices, offers a rich and dynamic web of linkage from micro to micro. From liking K-pop or another cultural form (micro), my informants expand to other cultural forms, such as television shows, language, history, and politics (semi-macro). This expansion of their cultural boundaries and capital creates the whole ecology of Korean popular culture, which is facilitated by cultural content and forms being realistic and relatable to daily life.

Rosalie: My interest in Korean pop culture is changing things to be more relevant in my life like putting Korea into consideration for different things like music, media, language, food, etc. Many aspects of my life have been relevant to

Korea because of the Korean Wave. It made me aware of how much I didn't know about the world outside.

Greyson: It has become so ingrained in my day to day. Like every morning, I wake up and the first thing I do is I check YouTube to see if there's any new videos from any of the accounts that I follow. I go take shower. I put music on. Music has always been a huge part of my life because I am not really good on the social situation so that I can use it as an out... I've always listened to music because I found that could be used as an out for me to use to handle social situations. For me, Korea is an outlet. For me, it's an escape in a lot of ways. I have a hope for a better place that seems to resonate as a better place in my mind. Korean culture in general [the humbleness, respectfulness, *aegyō*, cute culture].

Anya, one of my primary informants, is passionate about various aspects of Korean culture, especially K-pop. As a mother of two children, she is often outspoken about political issues and pays keen attention to various aspects of sociopolitical systems. At first, she seemed to me as a person who would never cry. Anya's and my favorite K-pop groups and members often overlap. We often talk about our favorite scenes from K-pop music videos or latest variety shows featuring our favorite groups or members. One day, we were talking about our latest interests in K-pop groups and songs at a downtown café in Texas. She took her smartphone out of her bag because she wanted to share with me one of the K-pop performances she really loved. We watched the video together on

her smartphone, which was hard to listen to in the midst of a bustling café in the bright afternoon. But I felt like neither of us cared about it. We, both as K-pop fangirls, just appreciated the moment of watching and listening to our favorite K-pop song and video together. When we finished watching the performance, I asked her, without thinking a lot, what K-pop means to her. She suddenly burst into tears and shared her intimate stories about going through some depression and how K-pop “saved” her. I also got teary eyes because I sympathized with her feeling; she seemed sincere, and I was appreciative of her sharing the story.

Anya: This may sound dramatic. Long story short, K-pop saved my life, really. It’s rejuvenated me. It gave me a reason to keep going. I had passion to get something and I really needed it. It just spoke to me on so many levels. The easiest way to say this is it just gave me passion for something and a sparkle of life that was missing. It saved me from some serious depression.

U.S. fans’ reception of Korean popular culture in daily life creates a complex ecology of transcultural Korean Wave; it also encourages U.S. fans to renegotiate their previous identities into new layers of multiple identities, turning them into transcultural fans (macro). TinTin and Leoy share how their interaction with Korean popular culture has influenced the formation of their fluid, multiple identities.

TinTin: I think it's become a part of my identities... It's penetrated into my life. If I suddenly stop doing all things Korean cultures, I wouldn't be doing anything. I never realized how much my life has evolved until recently... I'm constantly talking to these [fans of the Korean Wave] people [on social media]... The reason why I got this second job was to pay for my Korean stuff. Because I want to go to this concert and I want to do all this stuff and I need to pay money and it's very pricey. I want to go to South Korea. We [some of KIG members] are planning to go this year. I got the second job, so I can afford to do all the stuff that I really want to do like concerts, buying merchandise.

Leoy: It [Korean popular culture] has been such a big part of my life for so long now. My life wouldn't be where it is right now, and also I wouldn't want it to. So many people I've met because of my appreciation of Korean culture. I get a lot of personal growth. I feel like it's good for my soul to try. It has given me a lot, which is why it's important for me to try to give back. I feel like I am an active participant and has formulated my life.

In order to learn and understand other cultures, embodied learning and experiences are significant. Cultural signifiers are different from context to context. When an individual confronts such differences in reality, however, one often forgets distinct origins and unconsciously projects her/his own cultural beliefs. Culture, however, is not a thing one can simply learn by just watching a one-minute video on YouTube.

Fully engaging in a different culture and understanding cultural differences require embodied learning situated within the culture. In early 2017, Leoy moved to Korea to pursue her long-awaited dream of living in Korea. She told me that she is humbled to experience being a minority in Korea as opposed to being part of the dominant White race in the US. According to Oh (2017), the important question is not so much about how to sustain the Korean Wave, but rather how the movement of Korean Wave across global circuits can contribute to the potentialities of hybridity in which Bhabha (1996) once theorized as an escape from fixed identities that helps to level global power.

The world of transcultural media and fandom are about mutual understanding and learning. The people in KIG frequently ask me—someone who identifies as an acafan, native Korean, fluent in the language, and more familiar with the sociocultural and political background of Korean culture—questions regarding Korean and American (popular) culture in general such as certain Korean words and behaviors they see on social media. Also in reverse, I ask them questions about their perception, interpretation, and understanding of certain Korean and American (popular) culture. Our multilateral inquiries create a mutual understanding and learning, which deepens cultural capital and leads to a communal bonding of *woori-ness*. Therefore, the world of transcultural media of the Korean Wave and its fans are symbiotic and interdependent in a global sphere.

America is made up of so many different cultures, and therefore, becoming a fan of another nation's popular culture does not necessarily make Americans feel that they are a traitor, but rather that they are a more transcultural entity. They have expressed

aspects of Korean culture that Americans can learn from—such as integrity, respect, and the *woori-ness* culture.

J.C.: [One thing America can learn from Korea is] Integrity. I'd definitely agree that the way our pop culture is going super sexualized and it gets presented to other nations, countries and cultures, and people are automatically going to think about American people that we're all promiscuous, loud, wanna-go-get drugs, self-centered people. We are not all promiscuous, loud, self-centered people, which I'd say is probably why there are some of us like 'Let's learn this culture and language and we can change the minds of other people, other countries'... American culture can look at more positive light because I feel like people outside of the nation think of Americans as uncultured... At a personal level, it has affected my life like, 'Oh there's something like that out there. What can I do to bring some of those similarities to the people around me so that I can spread? What can I do to get more of that *we culture* around me?'

Binzy: We should bring back the respect. Not only for your own elders but for everyone.

J.C.: It'd be nicer if we could be able to bring that kind of "we as a nation culture" back together. It's fine to maintain your individuality but to realize that cheesy but "we're all in this together as a country" [mindset]. [It's very polarized

in America with] different cultures, classes [and races]... I don't think we ever truly been "we're all one" because there have been too many different kinds of people. I think more than any other countries, we'd need the "we culture" because we are so different. I think it's more necessary here [than in Korea] because it's easier for us to hate other people because we don't look like that... Even though she doesn't look like me, she still understands the struggle I'm going through... It's hard to be proud of American when you have so much [hate] going on in your nation between different people.

Although the Korean Wave is apolitical, its consequences can be political as evidenced in a number of previous studies (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim, 2009a; Kim, 2009b; Kim, 2015). One should be careful not to simplify or dichotomize the cultural hybridity found in Korean popular culture as either the East or the West. Transcultural audiences enjoy what the Korean Wave has to offer, and in doing so they actively construct and negotiate cultural meanings and identities on their own. Even though the Korean Wave is apparently tied to the culture, economy, policy, and politics of Korea, the primary site of reception for international fans is their own locality (Choi & Maliankay, 2015).

I stated in Chapter Two about the political economic aspect—Korean government's strong support and active involvement in the cultural sector—of the Korean Wave phenomenon. However, Shim (2013) argues that spread of and exposure to foreign popular culture, be it via social media or not, does not always *guarantee* its

popularity overseas because the *cultural habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) of audiences is intrinsically complex, fluid, and unpredictable. The reception of products is neither fully controllable nor predictable by media producers and policymakers. Media texts are never self-sufficient structures of meanings themselves; they are provokers of meanings and pleasure and are full of humor, like *puns* (Fiske, 2011). The very act of fans' interpreting, transforming, reproducing, and sharing the so-called hybridized Korean popular culture makes it transcultural and global, not necessarily the forms and content per se.

A number of KIG members expressed their frustration about *having to explain* to other Americans why they like Korean popular culture. It is seen as taken-for-granted when Asians like Korean popular culture. However, when it comes to non-Asian Americans, they often face looks of surprise, curiosity, or even straightforward derision. They are the ones who constantly have to reflect upon why they like to listen to K-pop that is not in English, why they find so-called "too feminine" Asian guys attractive, and why they are interested in a language and history that have little relevance or proximity to theirs. Leoy, a devoted fan of not just K-pop but also Korean language and history, once told me that, "It's mostly liberal people in the US who like K-pop." This is where the globality of transcultural Korean Wave meets the locality of American fans, leading them to continuous negotiations of their cultural identities.

The purpose of studying the reception of Korean Wave among American fans should be directed at reconfiguring globalization theories that recognize the dynamic formations of identity and hybridity at the local level while not dismissing the power inequalities in international settings. As I have explored throughout this study, popular

culture is bound to have social, cultural, and political ramifications when circulated across borders: the *effect of micro on macro* (Fiske, 2011). We can better understand the complex webs of transnational media culture, albeit provisional, only when we start to take fans' reception of transcultural popular culture more seriously. Closely interacting with transcultural fans—in this case, members of KIG—with a trans-local ethnographic approach—in this case, my identity as native Korean acafan with a reversed ethnographic approach—at the heart of globalization of media culture provides not only context-sensitive but also cross-cultural accounts.

One of the interesting traits of Korean Wave fandom in the United States is its immensely multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural communities. Korean Wave fans in the US acknowledge the diverse polycentric communities of the fandom. Those who interact with Korean popular culture in/voluntarily promote and reinforce diversity and multiculturalism by intersecting and transgressing beyond their national and cultural boundaries. TinTin once told me that even if Korean Wave just becomes a passing fad in the US, it still has significant social, cultural, and political ramifications in the future. The visibility of K-pop in the US signifies the exposure of Americans to non-US/Western culture with a significant degree of cultural and racial odor attached.

Sean: I always think it's good to exposure yourself to other cultures because I think it's important to be able to see things from other people's perspectives. I love the US, I love being an American, but the US isn't the entire world. I think the US is like 5 percent of the world population or something. There's a lot more

to the world than just here, so I think it's important to understand other places in the world. And now the world is so globalized and interconnected. I think it's important that you expose yourself to other places and ideas.

The unexpected transcultural spread of Korean Wave has ironically challenged the people of one of the most racially homogenous countries in the world to be more aware of multicultural diversity: the reverse effect of the Korean Wave back to Korea.

J.C.: I'd hope that Korean people, I'd just boil it down to Korean fans, I hope the Korean Wave would make Korean fans more open to other culture as well, realizing that 'people enjoy our (Korean) culture so much that I'd open my eyes to know more about other cultures'... Maybe Korean people who are not so knowledgeable about other cultures would be able to understand discrimination and prejudices. *Sam Okyere* [a Ghanaian television personality in Korea] has been able to make influence and a change in pop culture in regard to Black people. It has changed a good portion of younger millennial that is going to be influencing the way that Koreans are going to see the outside of the world, not just Black people.

Rosalie: Diversity is important because you just learn so much... The worldwide phenomenon of the Korean Wave is a good signifier of breaking stereotypes, particularly toward Asian people in the US. And even in the *reverse* though. I

hope that they [Koreans] become more aware of other people liking Korean culture. I know it's very [racially] homogeneous in Asia. I hope the Korean Wave sends *reverse wave* back that it's not only the White people in the West. I hope the Korean Wave would also help break some of the stereotypes Koreans have toward non-Koreans. I hope the Korean Wave *brings* diversity into Korea.

The Korean Wave, as hybridized media culture, not only encourages transcultural American fans to rediscover their cultural identity, but it also works in a reversed way. The unexpected popularity of Korean popular culture outside of the Korean territory encourages the so-called homogeneous country to be aware of diversity and multiculturalism. The influence and effect of the Korean Wave as both transnational and transcultural is not unilateral but multidirectional. It is important, therefore, to not only look at content and forms of Korean popular culture, but also what sociocultural implications it might yield in global/international settings.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

1. BRIEF BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The globalization theories, as opposed to imperialist theses, provide more flexible and complex theoretical accounts, which help to explicate the dynamic consequences derived by technological developments and the prominent emergence of hitherto non-center and so-called non-dominant-Western countries as major cultural producers and exporters. In the midst of an increasingly complex interdependence among countries in international settings, the flow of media culture, particularly popular culture, has become more dynamic (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Straubhaar, 1991). The development and proliferation of digital technologies along with the rapid globalization process in the 1990s have facilitated the surge of transnational flow of Korean media content across the globe. With enough hard power of economic affluence, Korea has become a neo-colonial global cultural power (Chen, 2000), receiving worldwide attention and popularity for its popular culture, mainly K-drama and K-pop, but increasingly other cultural forms as well.

For the past 10 years or so, scholars have examined and explored the realm of the Korean Wave, a successful reception of Korean popular culture—K-pop, K-drama, TV shows, language, food, history, etc.—outside of the Korean territory (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Hong, 2013; Jin, 2016; Jin & Yoon, 2014; Jung, 2011b; Jung & Shim, 2014; Kim, 2013; Shim, 2006). However, very few researchers have explored it empirically with first-hand accounts in Western contexts, particularly the United States. The increasing prominence of the Korean Wave, especially K-pop among the young digital generation,

compels scholars to analyze the phenomenon much further from a new direction. It was in this vein that I attempted to explore beyond what has already been discovered and below the surface of the expressed interpretations.

Employing various interdisciplinary theories from globalization, critical/cultural studies, media studies, fandom studies, and postcolonial studies and methods from a qualitative ethnographic approach and grounded theory, I conducted *reversed* media ethnography to look at fans' complex and dynamic reception—to a larger extent, the ecology of transcultural media fandom—of Korean popular culture in the United States. Traditional ethnographic research has been conducted by Western researchers onto the so-called non-Western cultures and people perceived as exotic “Others,” and thus the point of departure inevitably reflected Western perspectives (Weiss, 1994). I used the term *reversed* in part to examine the contraflow of media culture. It also emphasizes my own identity as an outsider scholar—from a country that had been more *peripheral* to the power structure in the world—who is studying the impact of its cultural exports on people in one of the *central* countries like the United States. In other words, instead of being a Westerner studying another culture, this study involved a Korean researcher studying Korean popular culture through direct observation and interviews with American fans. This *reverses* the traditional ethnographic dynamic in which scholars from *central* countries study the *peripheries*, hence *reversed* media ethnography.

My reversed media ethnography over a period of two years includes participant observations and various structures and types of interview methods with a local group, Korean Interest Group (KIG), in Texas, in the United States. Between early 2015 and

early 2017, I regularly engaged in qualitative interviews and participatory observation of meetings, events, and activities that are related to Korean popular culture. The rich corpus of data included both citations from my field notes on participatory observations and quotes from interviews. Most of all, my 14 key informants with whom I have closely interacted on a regular basis and conducted in-depth qualitative interviews periodically for the past two years illustrated cultural practices and relationships that cannot be found in quantified numbers. Based on grounded theory, I reconstituted data into conceptual development—patterns, themes, and concepts—to support my arguments.

Because my dissertation is a qualitative project aimed at understanding audience interpretations, I did not attempt to provide generalizations about U.S. fans' reception of Korean popular culture. Instead, I attempted to unravel detailed analyses and possible conceptualizations of their reception by connecting recurring patterns and themes. The purpose of studying the reception of Korean Wave among American fans is not to impose Korean imperialism, but to reexamine globalization theories that recognize the dynamic formations of identity and hybridity at the local level while not dismissing the power inequalities in international settings. I consider pertinent arguments—globalization, hybridity, soft power, popular culture, identity, fan studies—as pieces of a broader theoretical and practical picture and recognize the power of each in the hope that we can better understand the complex circuits of cultures in international, transnational, transcultural, and global contexts, albeit provisional. I believed one of the ways to do so was to start taking fans' reception of transcultural popular culture more seriously, and

closely interacting with them with a trans-local ethnographic approach at the heart of globalization.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This section summarizes the key findings—recurring patterns and themes—of my dissertation based on reversed media ethnographic approach to KIG and my 14 key informants in the United States. I revisited relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks of globalization in light of the Korean Wave in order to address the following research questions.

2.1. Korean Forms of Hybridity

Two of the key questions addressed the cross-cultural similarities and differences U.S. fans see in Korean popular culture versus U.S. popular culture, and what motivates them to interact with Korean popular culture. The hybridity embedded in various forms of Korean popular culture— mostly but not limited to K-pop, K-drama, language, history, etc.—creates complicated webs of transcultural media. I find that U.S. fans perceive Korean popular culture as similar to their own in terms of both being capitalist-driven, industrialized, economic societies, but different in the cultural plane. There are distinct scents or perceptions of specific Korean modernity in the cultural plane that motivates these fans to interact with Korean popular culture. One of them is honorific culture—harmony, politeness, and humbleness well manifested in Korean popular culture and also in the Korean language through the use of honorific titles. Greyson, one of the key informants, shared his thoughts on honorific culture:

Greyson: The US doesn't have the same depth of traditions like, for example, we don't have the formal and informal level of speaking. We have traditions here but honorific is something like so far beyond the way that we, most people, probably wouldn't be able to contemplate applying that.

Another recurring pattern I found is the notion of cute culture. Cuteness, as an appeal, invites others to engage in social behaviors including companionship, cooperative action, and communication (Dale, 2017). It can also turn into a decentered form of soft power (Botz-Bornstein, 2016). In the East Asian region, cute culture has an overarching mainstream presence far more than in other regions of the world. The cute culture in Korea is much more mainstream and widely embedded in various facets of media and society than in the US.

Greyson: It [cute culture such as [*aegyo*²⁷] is very much part of the [Korean] culture that you don't even think about it. In Korean people, there's natural *aegyo*.

Although media forms might be similar in the US and Korea, U.S. fans perceived the media content to be greatly different. Almost all of the major informants said that whereas it is a social norm to have sexualized and aggressive content in American TV shows, K-dramas focus more on non-sexualized and emotional relationships. The Korean Wave fans in the United States find the content of Korean popular culture to be more

²⁷*Aegyo* refers to talking and behaving in extremely cute ways.

innocent, clean, and child-friendly to an extent that they perceive it to be more wholesome. They appreciate Korean popular culture and they feel comfortable consuming it. The notion of wholesomeness is embedded in almost all forms of Korean TV shows and U.S. fans find it comfortably appealing as it seems less aggressive, more child-friendly, and somewhat naïve. Rosalie, who is in her late 20s and has been a fan of Korean popular culture for more than a decade, shared her thoughts on the different portrayal of media content:

Rosalie: Whereas in American television shows, there's a lot more skin, it's more sexualized, in Korean television shows, even just holding hands makes my heart racing. In K-drama, it's more about building relationships more than getting physical with the other. [There's] too much unnecessary drama [in the U.S. pop cultural content whereas] Korean culture is different. It seems more wholesome, honest.

Alternative forms of gender representation—such as a softer form of masculinity—are other layers of difference in the cultural plane that motivate some U.S. fans. K-pop uses skillfully hybridized concepts that reflect various layers of masculinity. What distinctively differentiates in K-pop male idols from Western pop artists is that, unlike Western male musicians, men are not hesitant to dress up, do *aegyo*, or dance in extremely “feminine” and gender-bending ways while being extremely humble and modest. *Kkonminam* (flower boy) masculinity of K-pop male idols is particularly

interesting for its consequential ideological twists in the Western sphere. According to Jung (2010), the *kkonminam* phenomenon is a realization and renegotiated transcultural identity among diverse audiences as a communicative process. Leoy, a K-pop enthusiast in her late 20s, shared her thoughts on gender representation:

Leoy: In terms of pop culture, I agree [that America is more patriarchal in a way than Korea]. [More fluid gender representation in K-pop is what] I really appreciate about in Korean pop culture that's different from American pop. You take any American male group, they will not participate in half of the stuff the male group in Korea would do [such as] the *aegyo*, all of the Korean male pop groups that dress up in girl group outfits in performances like that.

These distinct scents or perceptions of a specific Korean modernity—honorific culture, cute culture, less-sexualized-wholesome content, and alternative forms of gender representation—in the cultural plane are some of the major motivations for U.S. fans to interact with Korean popular culture.

2.2. Mutual Understanding in Cultural Appropriation

Another key question addressed the ways in which Korean popular culture is consumed, interpreted, and reproduced: encode/decode. One of the areas where different understandings and interpretations of cultural elements and practices emerged was in the realm of cultural appropriation, to be more specific, K-pop's appropriation of Hip Hop. Understanding cultural appropriation, particularly of Hip Hop culture by K-pop artists as

well as the perception of ethnicity surrounding the practice, revealed cultural differences based on historical context. When popular culture is circulated across borders, the local context of its origin is often erased and instead projected through the lens of the receiving local context. Several of my informants were somewhat upset by some of the ways K-pop artists appropriated Hip Hop and Black culture (such as blackface) and expressed that the artists should show more sympathy to the sensitivities to Black/African Americans. J.C., a Black/African American K-pop fan in her late 20s, shared her thoughts on appropriating Hip Hop and Black culture:

J.C.: If you're going to take [African] American culture, and if you're going to do that, you need to do a little of research. I think there is a definite clear separation between being White American and being Black American. Being American in itself and being Black. Although Black people are American, for the most part, Black people have still maintained our own separate culture because we had to, because we were segregated. We were discriminated against, so you had to create your own thing that had nothing to do with White people.

One may argue that the fact that even though some K-pop artists are influenced by Black/African American Hip Hop does not necessarily mean that they are knowledgeable about the history of African American slavery, racial politics, or representational issues in the US as meanings can become detached from practices as they are circulated internationally. However, just because Korea does not share this

particular U.S. history and was not a historical imperial power does not mean it cannot become a strong global cultural power now. Korea and Korean artists need to be aware of, and be responsible for, the consequences of their commercial industries. The misunderstanding of K-pop's appropriation of Hip Hop often comes from the lack of linguistic and historical knowledge of each other's culture. Both Korean and U.S. audiences engage in seeing themselves and projecting their own histories and perceptual lens onto the cultural products they engage with. I suggested a different discourse for U.S. as well as Korean audiences that emphasizes a better understanding of each other's culture and history in order to achieve mutual responsibility and reciprocal sensitivity in this global era: the appreciation for and respect of the Otherness of each culture as well as subcultures like African Americans.

The ways in which U.S. fans consume and reproduce Korean popular culture are particularly well manifested in the realm of K-pop fans and their use of social media. Since the 2010s, K-pop has worked, especially for the young digital generation, as a gateway for international fans to open their cultural boundaries. Fan/user-created online sites and social media platforms are the core foundation of connection between K-pop and international fans. Social media is a vital conduit for American fans' consumption and reproduction of K-pop. Iliana, who is in her teens and produces amazing fanart, shared her thoughts:

Iliana: When I was into [Japanese] anime, I didn't talk to anybody on the Internet at all about anime. But then when I got into K-pop, there were so many people

who would comment on my stuff [Iliana posts her fanart—drawings dedicated to K-pop idols—on her social media accounts and shares with other fans] and then we end up having a conversation.

K-pop fans do not stop at just consuming K-pop content, but increasingly participate in reproducing, sharing, and distributing it as spreadable media via social media (Jin & Yoon, 2014; Jung & Shim, 2014). Some fans leave comments on social media, and others create their own YouTube channels to post reaction videos (Oh, 2017) and cover dance videos (Noh, 2015). The peer production of subtitles—fansubbing (Hong, 2013)—and translations for those fans who do not know the Korean language is another example of the ways in which U.S. fans participate in the reproduction and distribution of spreadable media. Members of KIG partake in this shared participatory culture. For example, TinTin and Iliana have been producing fanart—drawings and paintings of K-pop artists—and have shared their work with other fans on social media, such as on Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr. J.C. and Leoy are K-pop choreography enthusiasts. They have reproduced some of the K-pop choreography and led K-pop dance classes for the members of KIG.

2.3. Emotional Proximity and Korean Wave

The next key question addressed how Korean popular culture's hybridity un/consciously facilitates sociocultural implications of soft power in the United States. Korean popular culture reflects the traditional Asian values and ethos, which makes Asian audiences feel culturally proximate. What is interesting is that its wholesome

content with highly modernized and polished looks comfortably appeals to U.S. fans who were looking for clean-cut, less aggressive, and less sexualized media content, and it creates a feeling of affinity for people not within Asian cultural proximity. TinTin, a Black/African American fan of Korean popular culture in her late 20s, shared her thoughts:

TinTin: It (Korean popular culture) is very similar to Black/African American culture too. It's very polite. It shows a very close culture, and I love that. That's like what really highlights Korean culture for me—how close it is to African American culture. There is no rudeness.

I argued that my informants' emotional proximity, another layer of Straubhaar's (1991) cultural proximity theory, to Korean popular culture is not associated with a notion of *exoticization*—looking upon the East from a postcolonial gaze and constructing it as curious and bizarre—but *appreciation*—something they respect and can learn from. Anya, a fan of all things Korean in her late 40s, agreed with the claim:

Anya: What has become reality in America, especially with the aggressiveness and violence, is just too exhausting. It wasn't like that when I was growing up, but that is everywhere now. And I find it much more appealing that in Korean culture, it doesn't seem to be accepted. I appreciate that they make the effort to put this out as something to be emulated, encouraged, and followed.

The way the Korean Wave exerts soft power in international contexts differs from the way historically imperialist countries do so; it is seen as less threatening in the eye of the beholder because Korea, historically considered a ‘semi-periphery’ to the power structure on the global sphere, has never invaded or colonized any other countries. The skillfully hybridized Korean popular culture works as a mediator not only in Asia, but also in the West by filling a large demand and void for audiences who were looking for nonthreatening, wholesome content with polished looks. In other words, the Korean Wave brings U.S. audiences with different racial/ethnic/social/cultural backgrounds together by creating shared emotional proximity that is nonthreatening and comfortably appealing.

2.4. *Woori-ness* and Korean Soft Power

The next key question addressed what aspects of soft power—the ability to entice, allure, and attract others from outside of the country to think of the country favorably (Nye, 2004)—can be found within U.S. fans’ reception of Korean popular culture. I argued that the notion of *woori-ness* (we-ness in English, signifying unity and collective mindset) embedded in Korean popular culture and its fandom culture works as one aspect of the multifaceted soft power of Korea in the eyes of U.S. fans. Glorifying good behavior (such as humbleness and modesty) in conjunction with *woori-ness*—derived from the historical formation and building of the nation and the people of Korea over 5,000 years—can be seen as an alternative post-Western soft power in international settings as it frequently emerged from my ethnographic data. Some of my informants and

members of KIG expressed how they find the notion of *woori-ness* attractive and as something their culture can learn from.

Anya: [K-pop artists] are championing the good behavior [that is] modest, kind, and considerate. There is a different level of integrity that I don't find in my American culture. I appreciate that they [Korean popular culture] make the effort to put this out as something to be emulated, encouraged, and followed.

Theia, who is in her mid 30s and likes to watch K-drama, shared her thoughts:

Theia: I honestly have to believe that [the Korean Wave phenomenon] has a lot to do with their pride in their nation as a whole. There is a unity there.

The *woori-ness* embedded in Korean popular culture spills over to the fans in the US, and they experience and practice the feeling of *woori-ness* through interacting with Korean popular culture and its fandom culture. For example, some of KIG members create and share fanart via social media, teach other members K-pop choreography, and organize Korean food themed potluck parties along with playing traditional Korean games.

Leoy: I think that everybody would be happier if they lived their life the way Koreans, and fans of Korean music in particular, live theirs. I think it does have to

do with the sort of “we culture” in Korea versus “me culture” in America. [with K-pop] I get so much more out of it when I get to enjoy it with other people, and I don’t feel like Americans have the same idea.

The national, historical, and cultural trait of *woori-ness* is embedded in several aspects of Korean culture, and this relatively coherent notion can be seen as one of the multifaceted layers of soft power for some fans in U.S. society where the importance of individual freedom and diversity has been prioritized over national unification and individual sacrifice.

2.5. Ecology of Korean Wave: Cultural Capital and Multiculturalism

The last two significant questions addressed what implications Korean Wave’s soft power has on U.S. fans’ identity (or identities), and what cultural, social, and political implications the Korean Wave yields in global/international contexts. One of the traits that distinguish fans from general audiences is the level of investment—how much one is willing to invest. Leoy, one of my informants, said that there is a difference between a general audience’s casual enjoyment and her passion. One of the significant attempts my informants partake in to build their cultural capital was seen in their endeavor to learn the Korean language. The KIG members, including my informants, have a yearning for building their cultural capital, especially through learning the Korean language, as a means of appreciation.

J.C.: I want to learn the language because I can communicate in their native language. It's definitely about respecting the culture that I like so much.

The KIG hold Korean language lessons once or twice a week. Out of all 14 major informants, two of them speak somewhat fluent Korean and the rest of them all know *Hangeul* (Korean alphabet), basic grammar, and speak a few words and phrases.

One of the recurring patterns I found in the fans of Korean popular culture in the US is the expansion of their interest. My informants expanded their interest from simply liking K-pop or one cultural form (micro) to other forms, such as K-drama, TV shows, language, history, and politics (semi-macro). This expansion of their cultural boundaries and capital is applicable to Carey's (1975) notion of making macro claims from micro matters when studying media use as particular rituals. Linking micro matters to macro claims helps understand how the fans' expansion from one area of Korean popular culture to other areas creates the ecology of transcultural Korean Wave and fandoms (macro). The U.S. fans' reception of Korean popular culture in daily life also encourages them to renegotiate their previous identities into new layers of multiple identities, turning them into transcultural fans. Leoy, one of my major informants in her late 20s, shared how her interaction with Korean popular culture has influenced the formation of her fluid, multiple identities:

Leoy: It [Korean popular culture] has been such a big part of my life for so long now. My life wouldn't be where it is right now, and also I wouldn't want it to. So

many people I've met because of my appreciation of Korean culture. I get a lot of personal growth. It has given me a lot, which is why it's important for me to try to give back.

The U.S. fans receive Korean popular culture in their daily life, such as listening to K-pop on YouTube in the morning, watching K-drama that features their favorite K-pop idols, and taking Korean classes on the weekends. Out of all 14 key informants, four of them even moved to Korea to either work or attend school. They are the participants in the whole ecology of transcultural media and fandom of the Korean Wave.

One of the interesting traits of the Korean Wave fandom in the United States is its immensely multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural communities. Korean Wave fans in the US acknowledge the diverse polycentric communities of its fandom. KIG members and the informants I interacted with over the years come from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds: Caucasian American, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American and more. The ages range from teens to 50s with most participants clustered in the 20s and 30s. None of them knew each other before joining KIG, but they came together in the name of sharing a similar interest: Korean popular culture. Those who interact with Korean popular culture promote and reinforce diversity and multiculturalism by intersecting beyond their national and cultural boundaries. What is interesting is that the unexpected transcultural spread of the Korean Wave has ironically challenged the people of one of the most racially homogenous countries in the world to be more aware of multicultural diversity: the reverse effect of the Korean Wave flowing

back to Korea. Some of my informants felt that Koreans need to become more aware of cultural diversity and the impact of their popular culture beyond the country. In part that was my informants' desire for Korean artists to become aware enough that they would not offend American fans by using practices like blackface. But informants also hoped that Korea itself would benefit by becoming more accepting of diversity.

Rosalie: The worldwide phenomenon of the Korean Wave is a good signifier of breaking stereotypes, particularly toward Asian people in the US. And even in the reverse though. I hope that they [Koreans] become more aware of other people liking Korean culture. I know it's very [racially] homogeneous in Asia. I hope the Korean Wave sends reverse wave back that it's not only the White people in the West. I hope the Korean Wave would also help break some of the stereotypes Koreans have toward non-Koreans. I hope it brings diversity into Korea.

The unexpected popularity of Korean popular culture outside of the Korean territory can be a good signifier to encourage Koreans, one of the most racially homogeneous countries, to be more aware of the diverse and multicultural Korean Wave fandom communities outside of Korea. The Korean Wave, as hybridized transnational media culture, can encourage Koreans to be more aware of diversity and multiculturalism. Seen in this vein, the influence and effect of transnational Korean Wave and its transcultural fandoms are not unilateral but multidirectional. This is one of the

cultural, social, and political implications the Korean Wave yields in a global/international context.

3. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The following illustrate some of my theoretical and methodological contributions to the existing scholarship of global media culture and literature of the Korean Wave studies. First, I used a reversed media ethnographic approach, which still demands more attention and has not come to its fruition yet. Understanding globalization in ethnographic depth demands new deployments of ethnography that are locally based but globally engaged. The process of globalization is best understood from a local perspective, one that takes into account particular contexts and the lived experience of local people. Fans in the US understand and deploy the objects or texts of another culture—Korean popular culture—through the means they have at their disposal within their own cultural contexts. Yet, the media increasingly becomes implicated in intensifying patterns of distribution and dissemination through mainly Internet-based platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, or Tumblr. The call for greater local contextualization of studies of transnationally circulating media is a valuable contribution to our attempts to grasp the complexity of media flow and fandoms. Any consideration of the ways in which global media culture plays out in fandom should proceed both from the local context and our informed understanding of fan behaviors, motivations, and processes of meaning-making as driven by affective pleasures and investments.

Most of the previous studies of the Korean Wave addressed the *whats*, *hows*, and *whys* of international fans' and audiences' enjoyment of Korean popular culture and dealt

with various potential implications and meanings of the phenomenon both within and outside of the Korean territory. While these studies employed various methods such as surveys, interviews, and textual and discourse analysis to examine the phenomenon, very few provide first-hand ethnographic empirical explorations and interpretations of media reception. Based on previous studies, we already know that some international audiences or fans enjoy interacting with Korean popular culture. However, what has been ignored so far in the realm of Korean Wave studies are the mechanisms in which interaction occurs, continues, and intensifies. Any form of interaction and reception is constructed and functions in a specific social and historical context. The media ethnographic approach in my dissertation—a relatively long period of immersion in the scene where the actual reception of the Korean Wave among American fans occurs—provided the appropriate tools to know these mechanisms as a living organism.

Moreover, the past century of Western-centered scholarship talking to itself about audiences has permitted it to take contextual factors for granted. My work was a reversed ethnographic approach, which is not necessarily the same as the often so-called de-Westernized approach (Livingstone, 2015). I perceive my work to be not only a de-Westernized approach, but more “reversed” in that the fans being studied are Westerners and the point of departure and the gaze placed upon them is from a non-Westerner’s perspective. In other words, the gaze is from a member of the Korean culture studying how Americans consume her native culture. The reception of my participants’ media culture is non-Western—Korean popular culture—in their Western locality.

Some of the theoretical contributions of my study are based on the recurring patterns I dissected from my ethnographic data. I coined two terms: emotional proximity as another layer of Straubhaar's (1991) cultural proximity theory, and *woori-ness* as one of the multifaceted soft power of Korean popular culture in the US. I used grounded theory as a reference to derive theoretical concepts—emotional proximity and *woori-ness*—from the qualitative analysis of my ethnographic data in addition to substantiating the interpretation based on participants' expressions and use of words and meanings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The theoretical approach of cultural hybridity to the Korean Wave phenomenon has de-emphasized the multiple processes and practices international fans generate (Anderson & Shim, 2015). One must not look at the notion of hybridity simply as a binary model—such as resistance/domination and center/periphery—or a descriptive tool to explain certain transcultural phenomena of media culture because hybridity is never a power-neutral space. It is a space where different power relations are continuously negotiated and struggled with. According to Kraidy (2002), the theoretical challenge of hybridity lies in context; transnational hybridity creates ideological twists in global contexts and fulfills (or does not) its progressive potential in a local context.

I found that the Korean Wave works as a mediator not only within the East, but also in the West by filling a large demand and void for audiences who were looking for less-sexualized, non-aggressive, clean-cut, and wholesome content. At times, transcultural fans become fans of transnational texts not necessarily because of where they are from, but because they may recognize a subjective moment of emotional proximity regardless of origin. The high level of hybridity in Korean popular culture

arouses emotional proximity among not only Asian audiences but also American audiences to renegotiate their identities and to realize what they have been missing out on. I found that the simultaneously complex yet fluid hybridity and emotional proximity embedded in Korean popular culture appeals to U.S. fans and transforms into a multifaceted soft power: the *woori-ness* (we-ness in English), signifying the unity of a collective mindset.

The notion of *woori-ness* works as a significant yet under-recognized facet of soft power when studying the implications of the Korean Wave in global/international contexts. This relatively unified notion of *woori-ness* is deeply embedded in various facets of Korean popular culture and can be traced back to the historical formation and building of the nation and the people of Korea as I analyzed in the Findings chapter. Whereas the form of Korean Wave is highly hybridized and transnational, the driving force behind it, ironically, is homogeneous and unified. Rosalie shared her thoughts on the notion of *woori-ness*:

Rosalie: This [*woori-ness*] is the driving force behind all the success and today's global phenomenon of Korean pop culture. And they are not selfish about it either. Korean culture is very much about community and collective society as 'we are one.' In the US, it's very much about the individual. It's not *we*, it's *I*; it's *my* house, it's not *woori* [our] house as in Korean.

Fans of the Korean Wave in the US find a strong sense of community and belongingness—*woori-ness*—embedded in Korean culture. They are drawn to Korean Wave and find Korea's unique cultural aspect of *woori-ness* as a path to globalization fascinating. This relatively coherent *woori-ness* can be seen as one of the multifaceted layers of soft power in the eyes of non-Koreans, especially in the US where national unification and sacrifice have been relatively silenced for the sake of individual freedom. It is important to remark that although soft power can only be made possible with substantial hard economic power, it is not always guaranteed. This is where Korea's *woori-ness*, derived from its historical position of in-between 'semi-periphery' to the power structure in the world, comes in, working as an alternative post-Western soft power in international settings.

4. LIMITATIONS

My study is not without limitations. My main ethnographic observations and interviews took place in one particular state in the US: Texas. Texas has its own unique culture, and therefore, readers should be careful not to generalize my findings as representative of the entire U.S. fan base of Korean Wave. However, as I stated several times throughout my dissertation, my goal was to provide an in-depth, but inevitably fragmented moment of the whole ecology of transcultural media and fandom as a qualitative project, not generalizations about globalization or Korean Wave. Ethnography unravels the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, *detrterritorialized* world—the idea of seemingly borderless flow of culture, economy, and people (Appadurai, 1991). For my specific research topic, I found it appropriate to conduct an

ethnographic approach to intersect global (Korean Wave) and local (Texas, US) fields as it provides detailed analyses and a deeper understanding of audience interpretations that cannot be found in quantified numbers.

Another significant issue that needs to be addressed is the idea of self-reflexivity in my reversed ethnographic approach. I am a native Korean who has lived in the US trying to understand how Americans interact with Korean popular culture. There is always the danger that my participation in the field may have affected my participants' reception and expression. As a native Korean interviewing Americans about my (Korean) culture, my ethnic, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities may have influenced some of their answers. I also may have misunderstood their reactions.

Nevertheless, all cultures are interconnected to a greater or lesser degree, and people are simultaneously engaged in many cultural practices at once, constantly moving across multidimensional, transnational space (Ang, 1996). This contemporary cultural condition—postcolonial, postmodern, globalization, or whatever one names it—engenders us to move away from positivist knowledge into the direction of storytelling and narrative. This does not mean that accurate data gathering and generalizable inference making is not important. It means that our deeply partial position as an ethnographer should be seriously confronted and considered, hence the importance of self-reflexivity. An ethnographer's partial position is not to be eradicated, but to be acknowledged as an inevitable state of affairs, which implies the researcher has responsibility as a producer of descriptions and an interpreter of and during the meaning-making process. Ang (1996) coined this as the “burden of authorship.”

“There is no politically innocent methodology for intercultural interpretation” (Clifford, 1992, p. 97). Unlike positivist quantitative approach, qualitative ethnography takes the researcher as an *instrument*. Data is observed through the mind and body of the researcher in ethnography. Ethnographers, as an instrument, not only participate in the field, but also in their data as they analyze it (Gray, 2002). They flexibly move in and out of their data, which enables them to provide more than the objective, positivist perspective. Ethnographers carry a “burden of authorship” (Ang, 1996), and this burden has to do with how ethnographic authorship is a form of cultural inscription that reveals the politics of our intellectual work. Self-reflexivity is the ultimate political responsibility of the researcher. Ethnographer’s self-reflexivity should reflect an honest, authentic and transparent awareness of his/her own identity and research approach, and should show an attitude of respect toward participants, audiences, and other research stakeholders. It includes sharing one’s motivations in conducting a certain study and engaging in practices so that readers know that the researcher has considered her/his role and impact on the scene.

Throughout all stages of a project, from the early stages of research design to later stages of writing, I carried this burden of authorship in considering how my intentions and physical presence at the scene impacted the data. Throughout my entire ethnographic work, I tried to be honest and transparent when immersed with the KIG and my informants. From very early on when I joined KIG, I identified myself as a transnational researcher from a university and an acafan of Korean popular culture. I was sometimes outspoken about my particular research interests in transnational media culture, Korean

Wave, and soft power. The more I immersed myself in building a close rapport with my key informants, I felt that my participant observation was more than an ethnographic observation. Rather, it was a somewhat a complete participation in ways that my interaction with them inevitably has affected the formation of their identities and their reception of Korean popular culture and vice versa. Hall (1980) once said that the complicated webs of cultures are not unilateral but always multidirectional, a “circuit of cultures.”

5. FINAL REMARKS

More than two decades have passed since Appadurai (1991) theorized the global interactive system as complex, non-deterministic, and heterogeneous. Image, the imagined, and the imagination are central to all forms of agency, are themselves social facts, and are the key components of the new global order (Appadurai, 1991). Mediascapes provide large and complex products of images and narratives to viewers throughout the world in which the world of commodities are profoundly mixed. Global culture is shaped by the communication process of local reception (Hall, 1991). As some postcolonial scholars (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Chatterjee, 1993) have emphasized, there really is no such entity as a single national culture, and to a larger extent, all contemporary cultures are hybrid. However, as I emphasized throughout my dissertation, hybridity should not be used as an easy tool to explain any national, regional, international, or global media culture because its complicated in-between space is never power-neutral but demands constant struggles and negotiations over cultural meanings and symbols. I argue these intricate layers of hybridity are well manifested in

Korean popular culture and its fandom. The carefully structured way of hybridity in Korean popular culture is not just a mere influence on the U.S. fans of the Korean Wave, but a part of the creation of the ecology of transcultural media and fandom.

One of the purposes for studying the reception of the Korean Wave among fans in the United States is not to impose the idea of the great soft power of Korean-ness as a neo-colonial global cultural power, but to reconstitute globalization theories that recognize the dynamic formations of identity and hybridity at the local level while not dismissing the power hierarchy in international settings. As Oh (2017) contends, we should direct our attention not so much to how to preserve the Korean Wave, but how the movement of Korean Wave across global circuits can contribute to the hybridity that helps to level global power.

The ecology of transcultural media and fandom is about mutual understanding, responsibility, respect, sensitivity, and learning. As much as the members of KIG—especially my major informants—learned from me, it was me—who identifies herself as an acafan, a native person of the culture they love and respect—who learned more from them. Throughout our close interaction over the years, they have influenced me to know more about the intricacies of social, cultural, political, and historical differences and similarities as well as to continuously self-reflect on my native culture and identity. One of the most significant things they have shown me, someone from one of the most racially and culturally homogeneous countries, is the importance of diversity. My informants come from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and political backgrounds, and I did not have a chance to interact with people from such diverse backgrounds when I was in

Korea. Sometimes, my reception of Korean popular culture (such as K-pop's appropriation of Hip Hop and aesthetic standards) as a native Korean is not the same as the ways in which Leoy, Rosalie, and Nicole perceive them. Yet, through building a close rapport with them, I learned how to value and respect the differences.

My dissertation unraveled dynamic interactions between Korean popular culture and its fans in the US, how cultural hybridity of Korean Wave un/consciously facilitates soft power, and what sociocultural implications it might yield in global/international contexts. The Korean Wave exemplifies strategically well-balanced cultural hybridity, evokes continuous negotiations of identities, and generates nonthreatening emotional proximity that appeals to U.S. fans with varying ethnic, racial, social, and cultural backgrounds in the name of *woori-ness*. The political economic aspect of the Korean Wave should not be undermined. Yet, spread of and exposure to foreign popular culture does not *guarantee* its popularity overseas. The transnational and transcultural reception of media texts is neither fully controllable nor predictable by media producers and policymakers because media texts are never self-sufficient structures of meanings themselves. The hybridized Korean popular culture as transcultural media defies identification as a fixed, single nature. In the midst of this phenomenon, there are the often-neglected participatory transcultural fans as legions of craftspeople that enthusiastically and willingly consume, interpret, share, and reproduce the culture of the "Other," actualizing the Korean Wave.

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Vita

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This dissertation was typed by the author