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Transnational Bodies  
Audience Performance in Anime and K-pop Media and Theatre Ecologies

by

Miyoko Ruth Margaret Conley

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Performance Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

New Media

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Associate Professor Abigail De Kosnik, Chair

Professor Miryam Sas

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## Abstract

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Miyoko Ruth Margaret Conley

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies  
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University of California Berkeley

Associate Professor Abigail De Kosnik, Chair

The transnational circulation of Asian popular culture has grown exponentially over the last few decades, revealing tensions between concepts of nationality and globality as these media are promoted as national products and simultaneously considered emblematic of neoliberal globalization. How do we study these media without forgetting cultural specificity, but also without retreating to ethnocentrism, which promotes national frameworks? My dissertation *Transnational Bodies: Audience Performance in Anime and K-pop Media and Theatre Ecologies* enters this conversation by foregrounding the vital role global audiences play in moving and co-creating transnational Asian popular culture, and how fans' engagement with these media negotiates their own racialized and gendered identities.

Through specific, historically-situated case studies that span across multiple media and platforms, my research analyzes the worldwide fan communities for K-pop (South Korean pop music) and anime (Japanese animation), and how their interactions form a collective I call "transnational fandom." Transnational fandom becomes a prime site to uncover tensions within global media surrounding race, gender, and nationality, as fans' performances demonstrate fraught assumptions about whose body is allowed to co-opt, claim, or otherwise take part in these media's creation and circulation. In some cases, fan performance promotes bounded notions of identity and shows implicit bias within their own communities, and in other cases, their negotiations with and through K-pop and anime open space for dialogue about complex intertwinings of race and gender vis-à-vis Asian media. Throughout my studies, I argue that fans' embodied performances are indispensable modes of inquiry to understand how audiences interrogate fixed notions of identity, community, and medium boundaries to form transnational, networked collectives. These collectives point to the uneven, messy, and simultaneous overlaps of transnational identity, but also suggest modes of community building that do not rely on binary constructions or solid borders.

Dedicated to my mother  
and my father

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## Introduction

### Transnational Fans, Transnational Bodies

*The final stage of narrative consumption points to a state of affairs wherein making a commodity and consuming it merge into one. There will no longer be manufacturers. There will merely be countless consumers who make commodities with their own hands and consume them with their own hands.*

—Ōtsuka Eiji, “World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative”<sup>1</sup>

In 2012, SM Entertainment (from here on, SM) debuted their latest boy band EXO. At this point in time, SM was already one of the largest and most successful entertainment companies in K-pop, or Korean pop music. However, EXO was a new type of group. While the group totaled 12 members, their concept was that the group was split into two, six-member groups: EXO-K, which would promote in South Korea, and EXO-M, which would promote in China. Their members hailed from Korea, China, and Canada, and many were multi-lingual. EXO was SM’s projection for the future of K-pop; one group that could simultaneously promote in different countries and appeal to a global audience. The promotion around their debut was intense and after 23 teaser videos, two “prologue” singles, they debuted in 2012 with the single “Mama.” However, after that, they went relatively quiet for an entire year, with no new releases and barely any TV appearances, something unheard of in the hyper-productive world of K-pop, where groups produce content quickly to stay relevant in an oversaturated marketplace. For example, another group that debuted in 2012, B.A.P, released four EPs their first year. However, instead of losing interest, fans—both within South Korea and outside of it—created so much fan material that EXO’s popularity grew within that first year, and the group became a full-blown phenomenon by the time they released their second single in 2013 (Nabeela 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in 2013, Japanese studio Animation Do (a sub-studio of the successful Kyoto Animation) released a contextless video featuring four anime guys swimming. There was no announcement to accompany the video, and while fans surmised the video might be the studio’s next project, no one was certain. However, the video caught the attention of many anime fans, not only because the characters were attractive, but also because the clip represented a departure for the studio, which usually produced anime with fan service for an assumed male-audience, such as the hit sensation *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (2006).<sup>3</sup> The new clip seemed to cater particularly to female fans who liked pairing male characters together, since, as one fan put it in a humorous slideshow, the characters were very easy to pair together even without names or a storyline (Yomimaid 2013). Overnight, anime fans produced a wealth of fan-made material about these nameless characters. Fans dubbed their new creation “swimming anime,” and started a worldwide petition asking the studio to make the anime. A month later the studio released a statement saying they were making the anime, now entitled *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* (from here on *Free!*), which was later broadcast simultaneously in Japan and on the international anime

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<sup>1</sup> All Japanese and Korean names will be in Japanese and Korean name order (last name, first name), unless the person prefers first name, last name.

<sup>2</sup> EXO’s second album, *XOXO*, sold over one million copies. They were the first South Korean artists to hit that milestone in 12 years (Lee 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Fan service in anime is when an anime contains references or tropes that are recognizable to fans. Sometimes it takes the form of titillation, where characters will be put in compromising situations or scantily clad outfits.

streaming service Crunchyroll. While the studio was almost certainly already working on the show, fans became an inextricable part of *Free!*'s narrative, to the point that the story told and reported was that Tumblr (the main platform for “swimming anime” fandom) created an anime (Romano 2013).

These two examples illustrate an inflection point within K-pop and anime media that challenged the *where* and *how* a transnational product is produced. Though heavily associated with their nations of origin (South Korea and Japan, respectively), the case of EXO and *Free!* show the centrality of transnational fandom within K-pop and anime media to both circulate and co-create these media products. I define transnational fandom as an ever-evolving network of audience members who are invested in border-crossing media (like K-pop and anime) and whose activities cross and exceed national boundaries, both online and in-person. Transnational fandom is not a new or recent phenomenon, but the example of EXO and *Free!* show how visible transnational fans have become, how they co-create objects, how media companies rely on their activities, and how they assert their identity as a transnational collective. Rather than being presented to audiences as “finished” products that fans then interacted with and remixed, fans actively co-created the narratives and images of these media objects from their earliest days (from debut for EXO and from promo concepts for *Free!*), and in doing so, became a central part of their overall narrative as well. These examples shift the conversation away from audience consumption of K-pop and anime as a one-way transmission (from company and country of origin outward) and rather shows that K-pop and anime—as prime examples of global media—consist not only of the flows of official media texts, but also the extraordinary proliferation of fans’ engagements *with* those texts.

*Transnational Bodies: Audience Performance in Anime and K-Pop Media and Theater Ecologies* focuses on transnational audience performance, or fans’ embodied, audiovisual responses to anime and K-pop media texts, which are heavily circulated online. Rather than a top-down study of global companies, I consider the primary role transnational audiences play in creating and moving anime and K-pop, and therefore the amount of power and agency they have in globalized media flows. Importantly, this work considers how embodied fan performance circulates within transnational, digital networks. Throughout four specific, interdisciplinary case studies that stitch together transnational fandom primarily in the United States, Japan, and South Korea, I argue that global Asian media has become a prime site for transnational fans to work-through cross-cultural issues and that embodied movement is an important but oft-overlooked site of contestation within transnational media circulation. Fan performances have become both an entertainment that people consume as part of K-pop and anime media, and a way that fans negotiate and question their power within neoliberal, globalized media structures. Rather than view transnational fandom as a utopic, cosmopolitan, and unspecific formation, I show transnational fandom to be a networked collective that defines itself through multiple, simultaneous, and often-shifting identities. So, while “nationality” is still a prevalent topic for transnational fans, they also assert themselves as part of a wider collective that is more defined by border-crossing movement on multiple levels. They are neither homogenized by global consumer culture nor defined solely by national identity.

My work investigates tensions within global media circulation surrounding transnationalism and strives to illuminate the specific contexts, crossroads, and performing bodies that move media. Attention to transnational fan performance shows how audiences trouble borders of nationality, race, gender, sexuality, and more through the digital circulation of embodied movement. K-pop and anime are prime platforms through which fans negotiate

complex, cross-cultural issues such as race relations, evolving definitions of the Asian diaspora, and the ways digital culture can reinforce global hierarchies. Transnational fandom is an ever-shifting, ever-moving entanglement of complex debates and desires, and their performances exemplify contemporary experiences of race, gender, and nationality, and push back against prevalent assumptions about transnational audiences—that they are without agency, tenuously bound only by consumer culture, and that their actions are ancillary to the “real” media. And while these performances do not come to one solution for the problems they engage with, collectively they show how fans continuously perform with media to try and imagine alternatives to seemingly static globalized media structures.

### **Anime and K-pop as Transnational Transmedia Ecologies**

Throughout this dissertation, I define anime and K-pop as transnational transmedia ecologies that include not only the animated show or K-pop group but spread out into other media, platforms, infrastructures, production processes, and audience practices. While these media are different in terms of history and cultural context, they are also emblematic of contemporary global media practices, where distribution across borders and saturation across multiple platforms is high. Due to anime and K-pop’s expansiveness and impossibility to contain within one medium, they provide an example of media as encompassing environments, and my approach to them connects to other media scholars whose work de-privileges one medium as dominant and rather considers media as interacting systems and infrastructures (McLuhan [1964] 1994; Fuller 2005; Bao 2015; Zahlten 2017; Lamarre 2018).

First, I view anime and K-pop as transmedia objects. Henry Jenkins (2007) popularized the term transmedia storytelling and defines it as “integral elements of a fiction” that get dispersed “systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.” In other words, transmedia storytelling is the telling of a narrative over several platforms and each iteration adds new information about the storyworld. Transmedia storytelling might at first appear confined to one overarching story and universe, where the narrative is controlled by a few specific producers. Big budget franchises usually fall into this model, such as *Star Wars* or the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and some fan scholars (Scott 2010; Gilbert 2018) are especially cautious of the ways that top-down transmedia storytelling strategies can dictate fan engagement for the benefit of larger corporations and stifle input from marginalized fans. However, other scholars take a more expansive view of transmedia storytelling and emphasize its participatory aspects and how a narrative gets built collectively. For example, De Kosnik et al define transmedia as “new versions, re-tellings, or extensions of narratives across multiple platforms” (2020, 34), which can expand to include audience and fan contributions to a text over time. The authors’ focus on the ways transgender folks continually iterate on and expand stories about transgender lives shows how transmedia storytelling aids marginalized communities, where collective engagement shapes narratives through generations. In the hands of these fans, historical narratives are never set but constantly in motion.

Many view transmedia storytelling as a fairly new phenomenon arising with digital media, though others have traced earlier incarnations of the technique (Freeman 2014; McClellan 2017). But for anime and Japanese media scholarship, transmedia storytelling is not a new practice. In Japan, the practice is called “media mix” (メディアミックス). One could argue that media mix and transmedia storytelling are slightly different, in that media mix is often thought of as a corporate practice, where a property is conceived as transmedia from the start for the

purposes of franchising. However, much like transmedia storytelling, that is not always the case with media mix, and scholars such as Ōtsuka Eiji ([1989] 2010) have defined it more in terms of “narrative consumption,” where an audience follows bits of a story to piece together a narrative whole. Importantly, anime was central to the development of media mix in Japan, and while the term did not come into use until the 1980s, Marc Steinberg (2012) argues that the modern incarnation of the practice arose with the development of modern anime and Tezuka Osamu’s *Tetsuwan Atomu* (1963). Effectively, anime has always been a transmedia object.<sup>4</sup>

Anime is not just animated TV shows or movies, but rather encompasses a sphere of experience. Firstly, anime properties span manga (comics), TV shows, movies, music albums, radio shows (done by anime voice actors), video games, toys, other commercial goods and their associated stores, themed cafes, voice actor meet-and-greets and other live events, theatre shows, and entire geographical areas (for example, Akihabara and Ikebukuro in Tokyo are considered anime fan hotspots). Anne Allison (2006) notes how one of anime’s defining traits is its offering perpetual transformation and play for consumers, a “continual change and the stretching of desire across ever-new zones/bodies/products” (277) that contributed to anime’s explosive global spread in the early 2000s.<sup>5</sup> This is not to mention the importance of fan activities within anime ecologies, which not only include *dōjinshi* (fan made comics), but also fan conventions that take place around the world, cosplay, fan art, pilgrimages to places that appear in anime, and more. Sugawa Akiko (2015) even argues that anime musicals are part of a larger event culture surrounding anime, where fans consume anime not as a text but as an experience (cited in Yoshioka 2018). As anime media mix strategies focus more on fan experiences through multiple sites, one could say that “anime” becomes more of an event than a bounded text. For this reason, I follow Thomas Lamarre (2018) and prefer the term transmedia ecology to describe anime (and K-pop), because the word ecology shifts focus away from one show’s narrative as a discrete object and places more emphasis on anime as a set of relations among platforms, infrastructures, and audience activities.

Ian Condry (2013) argues that the global success of anime has come from a collaborative, transnational production process involving both creators and fans, organized around anime characters as platforms for creative energy.<sup>6</sup> Condry focuses on the anime character as one primary way that anime extends beyond its television/movie format, as characters can be extracted from an anime’s narrative and “live” independently, appearing in and sliding between different media formats. Lamarre (2018, 210) notes that in addition to this “media switching,” the anime character is capable of “code switching,” by which he means the character’s ability to switch between different media codes, such as between the animated TV show, the commercials that play interstitially, and within the opening and ending songs of the show. However, I also see anime characters code switching in the more common usage of the term—alternating “codes” or languages (words, visual cues, and embodied gestures) depending on the group or culture they are in. A large part of anime’s transnational history is the way movies, shows, and games have

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Lamarre (2018) points out that Japanese scholars tend to talk about media mix in terms of generations, meaning its history is much longer than the rise with digital media.

<sup>5</sup> Specific examples of transformation and play that Allison cites are *Pokémon* cards and video games, the Tamagotchi pet caring game, *Sailor Moon* (1992), and *Might Morphin’ Power Rangers* (1993).

<sup>6</sup> I should also note that this collaborative process is transnational not only because of distribution or fans, but also because contemporary anime is often animated in other countries such as South Korea and the Philippines. While my work focuses more on audiences, I think it is important to acknowledge another set transnational labor circuits that produce anime and often get obfuscated.

been localized (or “glocalized”) for different cultures; meaning, the ways they have been altered in terms of jokes, cultural references, certain dialogue lines, or art for a specific national audience. In earlier global distribution efforts in the 1980s and 1990s, rather than asserting a Japanese identity for many anime, their companies viewed the characters as mutable for different cultures. However, conventions around localization have changed over time, and as this dissertation will explore, often shift in response to fans’ perceptions of themselves as transnational rather than of a particular national audience.

However, the focus on the anime character and its ability to morph between mediums and cultures also suggests the ways that the anime character’s body transforms. Azuma Hiroki ([2001] 2009) focuses on the deconstructive and recombinative potential of anime characters, as postmodern constructions that are made of database elements, which are appealing traits of the characters that fans extract. These traits can be obvious or granular, ranging from glasses, to kitty ears, to antennae hair (a little tuft of hair that sticks up like an antenna). In this sense, the anime character’s body is never a stable identity but one always in flux. In one way, this idea follows other theories of animation, such as Sergei Eisenstein’s theories of plasmatics ([1940] 2017), but importantly within Azuma’s argument is that fans (*otaku*) are pulling, combining, and spreading the database elements within a collective community online. Therefore, the creation of the anime character is always a conversation between the anime’s team of producers and the fans themselves.

As a pop culture product that formed in the 1990s, K-pop is more firmly associated with the internet and seen as inextricable from changes to digital music production within the Korean music industry. The first contemporary K-pop group, Seo Taiji and the Boys, debuted in 1992, which coincided with shifts to digital production. Parc Jimmyn and Kim Shin Dong (2020) argue that the digitization of music production in Korea turned the industry’s focus outward globally, using digital distribution methods to tap into new markets, particularly in Japan and other Asian countries, and then in the later 2000s, to the United States. However, crucially, this shift to digitization was not only in distribution method but happened at the time with other transnational industry practices such as hiring international music producers, training idols from other countries, and harnessing the power of fans to spread K-pop through the internet. While K-dramas (Korean TV dramas) and their explosive circulation throughout Asia in the early 2000s are considered the first iteration of the Korean Wave (also called *Hallyu*, the Korean term for the global circulation of Korean pop culture products), K-pop, video games, and animation are considered the leading exports of the second wave, Hallyu 2.0. Dal Yong Jin (2016) points to social networking sites and user-generated content as the core of this second wave. Digital technology is a part of K-pop, but also the way users connect over it and spread it transnationally is also crucial to K-pop itself.

In order to see how fans can co-create a K-pop group, it is important to understand K-pop as an entertainment system. Youna Kim (2013) uses the term “total entertainment” to describe K-pop, while Suk-Young Kim (2018) calls it “kaleidoscopic” to illustrate that it is a multimedia performance. The point is that for all these scholars and fans, K-pop is not just singles and albums. K-pop includes music videos (MVs), the choreography for each single and its accompanying performance or practice MV, image concepts for each album, television promotions, and live concerts. But even more so, K-pop revolves around the idols, which means that K-pop also includes the personal narratives of the individual idols and groups, their evolution as singers, dancers, actors, and overall performers. It also includes anything that the idol is involved in, which extends out to dramas, variety shows, livestreams, meet and greets of

various forms, commercials, musicals, and any other special endeavors the idol may do (and depending on the group, the idols may play these various roles in different countries).

Interwoven with all of this is fan activity, because for a K-pop group to be successful, fans need to engage with them and promote them. Since there is an overabundance of K-pop groups, idols rely on creating affective relationships with their fans so that fans will invest in supporting them monetarily and emotionally. This relationship could be fostered through company-sanctioned activities like meet and greets, fan clubs (for example, EXO's fan club name is EXO-L, short for EXO-LOVE), sporting a group's official color (EXO's is "cosmic latte," which is a silvery, sparkly color), participating in fan chants (chants that can be yelled at concerts and on music shows), and buying albums to secure the group a win on Korean music shows or bump them up international music charts. There are also unofficial fan activities like producing a myriad of fan works and tourism to K-pop-related spots. K-pop fans also have increasing access to idols through social media and livestreaming, which often falls in an in-between space of official and not-official but plays a key role in building the fan/idol relationship. Due to the importance of fans in K-pop's sphere, Kim emphasizes how K-pop fans impact and co-create Hallyu, making it a multi-directional transnational phenomenon: "The multi-faceted, digital fan culture in various locations implies that the Korean Wave is not simply a flow that originates from Korea and transnational corporates, but it is a multi-directional flow and a highly interactive ongoing process that is created, and possibly sustained by digitally empowered fan consumers" (2013, 14). Within Hallyu, and particularly K-pop, there are numerous actors around the world impacting its evolution and content.

The idol training system in South Korea is also a part of a K-pop group's transmedia narrative, and fans invest in understanding this system because it is such a strong part of K-pop culture. The large majority of K-pop groups are produced by entertainment companies. These companies cast young aspiring idols when they are teenagers (or sometimes younger) and train them for years in singing, dancing, acting, foreign languages, and in general, prepare them for the variety of activities that idols do. Eventually, if the trainee is lucky, they will debut in a group or as a solo singer, and for the first few years is essentially paying the company back for training them. Therefore, the company is always a part of the idol's persona. SM Entertainment's Lee Soo Man is credited with formalizing this system, what he calls "cultural technology," which is not only the training system itself, but also a method for producing group concepts that will appeal to transnational audiences, right down to the type of chords and visual styles to use for certain songs depending on the audience (Seabrook 2012).

Within this system, there is a focus on the mutability of the idol's body. Idols are meant to be able to shift roles rapidly; they not only sing and dance, but they change visual concepts for each single, album, and music video, which also means that sometimes they learn new skills to execute the concepts. For example, when the girl group After School released their hit single "Bang!" in 2010, they had a marching band concept and spent five months learning drumline techniques for their choreography. Idols also appear in dramas, commercials, variety shows, and sporting events, in addition to needing to learn foreign languages to appeal to different transnational audiences. Their bodies become technologies in themselves, able to transform themselves rapidly for whatever the situation calls for. This technological shifting is an overlap I see with anime characters, though importantly, it is different because idols are real people, which means that questions of their own agency is wrapped up in the ways that entertainment companies expect them to perform. I am not suggesting that K-pop idols have no agency in this process, but rather want to point to the ways that companies structure the "work" of idols to be

more about shifting and transforming for a particular audience, much how my beginning example of EXO was meant to promote in Korea and China, and also connect with English-speaking fans. K-pop, therefore, is a transnational media ecology that has a particular focus on idols' bodies as technologies and fans' affective interactions with those bodies.

Importantly for this dissertation, both anime and K-pop's media ecologies include live, theatrical events and when taken as whole systems, become experience-based media forms (Kim 2018). Part of my aim in this dissertation is to bridge a gap between media and theatre; while the two are often thought of as separate, anime, K-pop, and their transnational fans illustrate how questions around liveness, embodied performance, and digital media tie theatre and media together. For example, how should we view spaces like SM Entertainment's COEX Artium? SM's COEX Artium in Seoul's upscale Gangnam district is at best described as a multimedia shopping and performance space that blends the digital and the live; it is a physical building with three floors that include a store, café, gallery space, and theatre (showing both live and hologram shows). It also has activities fans can participate in like being able to take a picture with your favorite SM idol (through a digital photobooth) and other special events that happen throughout the year. Every facet of SM's COEX Artium reminds the goer that K-pop is an intertwining of the digital and the live.

Similar blends of liveness and digital media pop up in anime, through examples like store-event space hybrids like the large chain Animate. Hologram concerts for Vocaloid characters, which are 3-D, computer-generated animated characters that "sing" using voice synthesizer software, are another example of the digital and live within anime. However, I find it most useful to think of liveness in anime through Sugawa's (2015) term "2.5-Dimensional anime culture." The term comes from anime musicals, which are also called 2.5-Dimensional (2.5-D) musicals. The Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association<sup>7</sup> defines 2.5-D theatre broadly as any theatrical representations based on Japanese manga, anime, and video games. However, the term "2.5-D" was coined by fans of these musicals and then adopted later by industry use, showing how in-tune fans are to the intertwining of liveness, media, and theatre in anime. 2.5-D refers to the liminal space between 2-D and 3-D. The 2-D aspect is the anime character, where the 3-D aspect is the live actor/body onstage. Essentially, when one goes to an anime musical, one enters a space that is in-between the flat, 2-D anime and live, 3-D reality. Sugawa, therefore, expands this term outward to encompass all of anime culture, to show how integral liveness and performance is to anime, and how anime can be viewed as an ongoing event. While K-pop and anime may be more associated with media over performance and liveness, these examples show that live theatre and performance are essential components to their media ecologies, and also that K-pop and anime are performance experiences that need to be considered as part of theatre ecologies as well.

## **Transnational Fandom**

I use the term "transnational fandom" to describe the invested, global audiences of K-pop and anime, whose activities cross and exceed national boundaries in both online and live interactions. In invoking fans, I partly argue for the centrality of all audience actions within digital media; as Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka (2018) point out, users are the bridge between platforms and creative content, yet often go unrecognized in platform-focused studies.

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<sup>7</sup> The Japan 2.5-Dimensional Association is an organization that promotes and facilitates the genre of anime musicals both domestically and abroad. It was formed in 2014 due to the genre's growing popularity.

However, fandom is also a specific subset of audience. I use the word “fan” over “audience” primarily because these media rely so much on fannish engagement, meaning, they rely on people to emotionally invest in their narratives and follow all incarnations of an anime or K-pop group over time. Beyond that, my use of the word “fan” indicates the wider mainstreaming of fandom within contemporary media industries. Melanie E.S. Kohnen (2021) describes the mainstreaming of fandom as the perception that *any* audience member could be a fan, and that media companies are increasingly paying attention to fans as their most profitable and loyal audiences. This is in contrast with traditional fans studies definitions of fans as “people who follow a particular entertainment property,” and rather emphasizes a general passionate attitude toward interacting with media as a whole (160; see also Hanna, 2019; Jenkins, 2006; Stein, 2015; Scott, 2019; Stanfill, 2019). In other words, with the mainstreaming of fandom, fans are not simply people who like one show or group, but rather people who are eager to engage, follow, spread, and remix media texts overall. Additionally, I use fandom over audience to emphasize that fandoms are specific collectives with shared practices, though these collectives are more a shifting network through multiple locations, both physically and digitally. “Fan” underscores the ways media industries rely on fan labor and the ways that fans themselves become objects of consumption within K-pop and anime media.

While fans themselves are becoming more visible within mainstream media, studies of fans often hone in on one specific geographical location. Questions on how to study transnational fans and if such studies are even possible, are trickier. In the article “Global Fandom/Global Fan Studies,” C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby (2007) surveyed sixty-five scholars on the status of and possibilities for global fandom studies. Though framed as an exploratory study, their findings revealed the tensions surrounding the notion of “global fandom studies.” Harrington and Bielby point out the need for such an exploration as they argue that media consumption is possibly the most immediate, consistent, and pervasive way in which globalization is experienced. Their study is an attempt to figure out more possibilities in studying globalization beyond the macro political economic approach, focusing on industries, and also beyond the “micro (text-based) media reception,” which often looks at the effects of border-crossing texts and persons in a 1:1 approach (for example, “a Chilean in Chile watching *Desperate Housewives*”) (179). With media that is aimed toward a global audience, other methods of studying global media are necessary.

However, many of their participants expressed reticence at even using the term “global fandom,” for fear of losing culturally-specific contexts or geographically-located fandom. Studies of global fandom may run the risk of “suppress[ing] the cultural and social differences around the globe,” as one participant put it (192). Other scholars have similar concerns, critiquing studies on global fandoms that tend to focus on an unspecified cosmopolitanism and sense of identity based on consumerism (Ubonrat 2008; Kim 2008). However, Michelle Cho (2017, 252) cautions against what is usually the solution to these concerns, which is a retreat back into ethnocentrism. Sun Jung (2011) and Liew Kai Khiun (2013) see the potential of transnational fan projects to de-center the dominance of the English-language media and Euro-American audience reception within studies of global media as a whole. Their work on transnational K-pop fans, though nationally located within Indonesia and Singapore respectively, show how fans connect transnationally online, and how they are neither subsumed by globalized K-pop nor their own national identity. Through my own case studies, I argue that the feeling of being connected across borders is important to fans, and even if it may be a vague sense, transnational fans do feel part of wider collectives. And transnational fandom is not only

important for fans, but media industries focus on transnational fans as well, to prove the popularity of their products. Therefore, though it may be difficult to study transnational fans, and it is important to be wary of the pitfalls surrounding these studies, *transnationalism* itself is an important concept within border-crossing media fandoms.

I would also like to consider the term “transnational” and what it implies, because terminology is one way to frame border-crossing fandoms as more expansive than national borders and also as specific and intersectional. Henry Jenkins et al. (2013, 259) uses the term “transnational” to describe border-crossing media, because the word implies unevenness and allows for more cultural specificity, whereas “global” is more associated with the homogenizing force of globalization. Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock Morimoto (2013) advocate for the term “transcultural” over transnational, because transcultural can encompass a transnational orientation, yet open to other contexts and subject positions that may drive border-crossing fandoms. Within K-pop and anime fandoms, fans often use “international fans” (or I-fans) to describe those outside South Korea or Japan. All these terms have validity but emphasize different components of border-crossing fandoms. While I agree with Chin and Morimoto that border-crossing fans feel affection and ownership over media for many reasons that are not related to nationality, I use the term “transnational” partly to illustrate the ambivalent position nationality has within these fandoms. As will be seen in the following chapters, transnational fans negotiate and argue about nationality all the time, and also discuss how nationality intersects with other identities, such as race and gender. K-pop and anime industries juggle simultaneous agendas as global and national products, as both have been used to promote tourism and the overall global image of South Korea and Japan (Iwabuchi 2010; Kim 2013), even as scholars point out how the industries are more transnational in their production practices and how companies would probably much rather be seen as global media to garner the biggest audiences (Kim 2016).

However, I mostly use “transnational” because of the word’s emphasis on *movement* across borders, both geographical and technological. Miriam Tedeschi et al. (2020) define transnationalism as processual. It is the connectedness, movement, and transformation across borders, rather than one group moving to a different location. Therefore, transnationalism is what the authors call “in-becoming,” or always fluctuating. This term then allows for the focus on the movements across multiple borders, multiple times; transnational fandom is not solely international fans going *to* the objects, but rather a continual movement of fans and objects through dispersed networks. Transnationalism as ever-changing movement across borders also has implications for rethinking “locality” as being multiplicitous and not solely within a national context. In conceptualizing how transnational fans inhabit multiple spaces simultaneously, I am indebted to Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) notion of *locality*, which views a person’s locale as relational and contextual, rather than spatial. Here, locality is a “complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts” (178). Appadurai calls these various contexts “neighborhoods,” which can be virtual or physical, and often a person’s locality is a mix of various neighborhoods; therefore, the production of locality, as a process, is informed by various formations of virtual space, physical space, and human motion. This offers a way to conceive of transnational fandom as still unevenly spread, not unaffected by national or corporate interests, but active at a both a local and global level, across nations. Moreover, it conceives of a way to think of networks that run through fandoms as multi-dimensional, weaving through the various neighborhoods that fans inhabit online and offline. So when I use the term “transnational

fandom,” I do not mean to be all-encompassing of every fan in the world, but rather to indicate the idea of a wider, moving collective, which simultaneously intersects, covers, and immediately sits outside of geographical location.

### **Fandom Performance, Agency, and Labor**

Now I turn to fandom performance, how fans co-create their objects, and how performance is tied to labor and questions of audience agency within media. As previously discussed, anime, K-pop, and much of the contemporary media landscape is made up of a variety of experiences that expect and encourage audience participation. Many theorists associate the rise of active audiences with “newer” media (and often digital media) that they claim allows for greater interactivity. Marshall McLuhan ([1964] 1994) divided media into “hot” and “cool” categories, with the hotter, older media of film, theatre, and radio providing less participation, and the cooler categories of TV, comics, video games, and computers requiring the audience to interact more to fill in gaps and make meaning. John Fiske ([1987] 2010) calls television a “producerly” text that is open and polysemic, and Henry Jenkins’ (2006) concept of convergence culture, where audience participation is heightened, is grounded in digital media and the spread of content across multiple platforms. As Francesco Casetti (2013) notes, there has been a shift in terminology when discussing new media audiences to call them “users” rather spectators to imply how (inter)active they are.

While I agree that there has been a shift in contemporary media toward harnessing audience participation and therefore creating more open texts or transmedia stories, I do not ascribe it to a techno-determinist argument that audiences are active *because of* digital media. The questions taken up in this dissertation are part of a much longer historical discussions around active spectatorship, both in performance studies and media studies. Theatre and performance studies scholars have long argued for the agency of the audience in live performance (Fèral 2002; Fischer-Lichte 2008; Freshwater 2009). Traditional formulations of film spectatorship conceive of the film spectator as inscribed by the film apparatus, but other studies show historic examples of film spectators participating and co-creating the film event in the public sphere (Hansen 1994; Bao 2015). Additionally, there is also a long history of non-filmic media encouraging audience participation, such as popular magazines (McClellan 2017) or panoramas (Gunning 2014), just to name a few. Digital media does not *make* fans more interactive or give them more agency, just as film or theatre does not automatically make an audience member passive. But what has changed with convergence culture and the rise of digital media is the dominance of what De Kosnik (2016) calls “postmodern digital media production,” which is the practice of memory-based making, where mass culture is an archive that fans pull from for their own purposes to copy, remix, and spread through digital platforms. In other words, for De Kosnik the current cultural dominant is not one specific medium like film or television, it is performance, or the embodied actions that people repeat to build identity, community, and make meaning.

Fandom performance, then, is fans’ embodied, audiovisual responses to media that circulate and are repeated and taken up by fandom to assert their identities as fans, to build fan communities, and also to participate within their media. These performances can be anything from cosplay to writing fan fiction to producing reaction videos on YouTube to attending to conventions. Previous studies on fandom and performance have focused on cosplay (Lamerichs 2011; Rahman et al 2015) and fan fiction (Coppa 2006; De Kosnik 2016) as performative acts.

Perhaps it is easier to see how cosplay—creating the costume for and dressing up as one’s favorite character within an anime, film, TV show, game, comic, etc.—is a performance as it requires one to costume their body, take on the persona of a character, and act for an audience, either at conventions or online. By taking on the character persona, the cosplayer is asserting their identity as a fan of whatever object and as an extension of their self through individual customization of the costumes.

However, other fan activities are performances as well, and can challenge traditional notions of performance as bodily co-presence in time and space. Rather than looking at fan fiction from a literary standpoint, Francesca Coppa (2006) and De Kosnik (2016) view it as a performance – that is, fic writers, like play directors, move bodies in space, rearranging or restoring behavior from the source text. De Kosnik also emphasizes the *eventness* of fan fiction writing challenges as live, timed events, and in general, how fan fiction is always written collectively given the amount of back-and-forth between writers and readers (many of whom occupy both roles). A fic is not presented to its audience wholesale as a complete, discrete object; readers comment on the fic, and the writers take that feedback and collective knowledge into account when writing. Fan fiction therefore can be viewed as a *body medium* that mediates between physical bodies that are remote from one another. De Kosnik argues that the interactions of fan fic writers and readers are examples of people “coming together and doing together,” despite not being in the same place (corporeally), at the same time (234).

Vera Cuntz-Leng (2015) provides a useful example from *Harry Potter* to help us think through fandom performance in conjunction with technology and global media, and how fandom performance stretches out over time and space. Focusing on serial narratives that have parallel media releases (books and movies, in the case of *Harry Potter*), Cuntz-Leng uses Erika Fischer-Lichte’s (2008) conception of the *autopoietic feedback loop* to show how the interplay of texts (author), audiovisual adaptations (actor), and fan works (audience) produces consistency in how we understand certain characters or tropes (in Cuntz-Leng’s study, she looks at the formation of the character Severus Snape in *Harry Potter*). Fischer-Lichte’s (2008) conception of the autopoietic feedback loop describes how a performance is created through a feedback loop between performers and spectators: “Whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense, performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree” (38). The loop is the action and reaction from both audience and actor. For Fischer-Lichte, the autopoietic feedback loop only happens in strictly live theatre, or when bodies are co-present in time and space; in other words, within in a bounded, geographically situated, live event.

Cuntz-Leng, however, argues against Fischer-Lichte's notion that liveness is integral to the autopoietic feedback loop, and rather draws out the performative qualities in the creation of pop culture items across serial media like *Harry Potter*, which was not only serial in book format, but also in movie releases and ongoing fan fiction. Serial media are never really finished, despite their individual releases, and are the subject of constant changes and re-evaluations. Within Cuntz-Leng’s specific study, she shows how Severus Snape’s character changed over the course of the *Harry Potter* books, due to both Alan Rickman’s performance of him in the movies and fan’s portrayals of him in fan fiction (which author J.K. Rowling and the movie casts were well aware of). Therefore, because of serial media’s unfinished nature, created specifically for variation and repetition (much like theatre performances), the feedback between audience, various texts forms, and authors is ongoing; each iteration of the character Snape produces an

ever-slight variation, but moving toward the consistent “Snape” that we view today. However, I would add, that this is more of a provisional consistency; because both transmedia stories and performance are ongoing processes, which always include an element of unpredictability, Snape himself is a liminal character. Perhaps for the moment he is brought into view due to the intersecting contributions by Rowling, Rickman, and fans, but his edges are always in-motion, ready for another varied performance down the line. Fan performance stretches across time and space, changing both what the parameters of performance are and how serial media is framed.

This is one way that fan performance becomes part of the object and literally co-creates the object. The current emphasis on fans within mainstream media is partly a recognition of the power and agency of all audience members and their active participation within cultural texts. Rather than viewing audiences as passive recipients of a dominant message, cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall ([1973] 2019) and Fiske ([1987] 2010) argue that media audiences are not passive within their consumption as they actively de-code meanings from media texts and encode their own meanings into them. Fiske especially emphasized the political power of such actions. If popular culture is a social practice central to meaning making and identity formation, what is also central is how an individual or group negotiates the distributed power structures in the world; in other words, there is power in an individual’s ability to make meaning and that these seemingly banal acts are the seeds for social resistance. The acts can be resistant in themselves, like Hall’s conception of “oppositional” decoding, where the audience decodes the text in an actively controversial way, despite understanding the connotations of the text.<sup>8</sup> However, for Fiske, even if one does not explicitly make an oppositional argument, meaning making is a political act in itself, where pleasure is a powerful part of the process.

Fan performance, however, is also labor that produces value for the media object, which is another reason why media industries are increasingly trying to co-opt fan work. The way fans perform on objects and produce labor is another way that fan performance has been configured, and ties into works in performance studies that align performance with the neoliberal rhetoric of “performance,” as in, the pressure to perform well in one’s job or to produce something that is perceived as valuable by corporations or governments (McKenzie 2001; Harvie 2013). One could view fans as walking advertisements, and anything they produce acts as a gateway for non-fans. Every time fans act upon an object, whether through fan fiction, uploading videos on YouTube, or the creation of a Tumblr blog, they re-enact this value production. Therefore, the more fans become visible and the more their works spread, the more valuable fans themselves become. It is easy to see that fans are doing important promotion work when SM Entertainment held a gallery show of K-pop fanart in 2016, using fans’ work to promote idols, or when Marvel released a pre-trailer for *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) using fan reaction videos as a literal advertisement for Disney.<sup>9</sup> However, fans’ work does not have to be officially sanctioned to do this kind of promotion; most fan work serves as unofficial, unpaid labor for both the media object and fan communities and even if not used officially, serves to educate producers on consumer preferences (De Kosnik 2013).

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<sup>8</sup> Hall’s two other positions of decoding are the “dominant-hegemonic position,” and the “negotiated position,” which is a mixture of adoptive and oppositional elements.

<sup>9</sup> See “SM Entertainment is calling all of you talented artists to submit your fan art for 'FanBook'!” August 8, 2016, <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2016/08/sm-entertainment-is-calling-all-of-you-talented-artists-to-submit-your-fan-art-for-fanbook>; and “Avengers: Infinity War Trailer Tease,” Marvel Entertainment, YouTube, November 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VbHg5fqBYw>.

Many scholars have pointed out the complexity this brings to a traditional model of producer-consumer, where on the one hand fan work is still considered “free” and “amateur,” yet on the other is highly valued and sought after. De Kosnik (2013) succinctly sums up the issues surrounding fans, labor, and the rhetoric of “free.” Many scholars and fans have argued that fan work is always free; that fans do what they do for the love of it, and nothing else. Configuring fan work as free, and therefore detached from money and corporate interests, is more of a desire to think of subcultures as separate from capitalism, as authentic, as resistant than the reality. And as fans do much of their work online, the affective rhetoric associated with them is often conflated with idealized conceptions of the internet in general as a democratic, non-hierarchical informational network. However, fan cultures are already shot through with money and De Kosnik lays out the various ways this happens:

The Internet is not free space. [...] Many services that host fan works, such as LiveJournal, FanFiction.net, and YouTube, are for-profit enterprises whose revenues are driven by fan activity; fans must produce for these sites, and must consume what other fans have produced, in order for these sites to be successful businesses. Almost all fans pay for the privilege of participating in fan communities [...] And, occasionally, the culture industries pay fans for their work, as when video game companies buy game mods or when Hollywood studios hire fan film directors or special effects designers for industry jobs. Money already permeates fan productions. (2013)

I would also add that more and more fans are monetizing their work, partly because they recognize the labor that goes into it and that people will pay to consume it, and partly because of Millennial “hustle culture” or the imperative to be constantly working and turn every hobby into a side hustle, brought on largely by the financial crises of 2007-2008 (Griffith 2019). Fans are selling their fan art and video games or asking for monthly support through donation sites like Patreon, where they are paid to continue to create content.<sup>10</sup> And while many fans still derive enjoyment out of giving their work away for free, they perform labor on the objects to the point of destabilizing categories of producer, consumer, and object, showing that they are more tied to corporate interests than one may initially think.

Within a transnational context, fans’ labor and bodies also can serve national agendas. Koichi Iwabuchi (2010) reminds us that fans are never a neutral construct, and that within the era of “brand nationalism”—uncritical use of media culture to “brand” a nation—transnational fans often bolster national efforts to enhance political and economic interests. Iwabuchi’s example is Japan’s government-sponsored “Cool Japan” strategy, which invests in cultural development and campaigns to promote the perceived “cool” or attractive parts of Japanese culture overseas (anime, manga, animation, games, fashion, food, electronics, etc.). The Korean government has similar initiatives and has invested in its soft power industries as well. Considering both corporate and national interests in fan labor, fandom further proves the neoliberal collapse of work, leisure, and performance, which can be seen in both Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) notion of imagination as labor, and Vilem Flusser’s concept of “work,” where “in our activities (‘work’), we function just as we do at leisure (‘consuming’), as functions of many apparatuses” (2014, 16). As corporations and nations value fan activity more, there is a greater potential for them to exploit that labor.

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the fan fiction space is one where selling your work has still not really caught on, perhaps because of the long history and tradition of fan fiction being configured as free within fan spaces.

## Transnational Fandom Movement: Looping Transference

Discussions about audience performance, agency, and labor are at their core questions on how much political power fans have and how much they can affect change within dominant media structures. For every example of fan practices that are resistive and inclusive, there is an example of fan practices that reinforce corporate interests or dominant ideologies that exclude others. Fans and fan works can affect change, both through activist organizations like Fandom Forward (formerly the Harry Potter Alliance) or through fan-run websites that provide spaces for people marginalized by the mainstream media industry, such as queer folk, women, and people of color. Fans can also reinforce and uphold dominant social structures, from coordinated attacks on marginalized fans (such as the misogynistic movement within video games known as GamerGate)<sup>11</sup> to fans shutting down important conversations about race within fandom spaces (Pande 2018). Sometimes both can happen at the same time; in the summer of 2020, transnational K-pop fans were celebrated in U.S. media for their activist actions during Black Lives Matter protests,<sup>12</sup> while at the same time a segment of K-pop fandom was harassing and doxing (publishing private information like addresses) Black fans who critiqued the wildly popular K-pop group BTS (Dodson 2020; Ohlheiser 2020).

However, what I am more interested in is the role fannish movement plays in the co-creation of transnational transmedia and how it is used as a way fans negotiate those issues of fan agency. I call fannish movement *looping transference*, which is the repeated, corporeal movements that spread from body to body over online networks. These movements spread through other fans, non-fans, and are enfolded into the objects themselves. This does build off the previously mentioned concept of the autopoietic feedback loop (Cuntz-Leng 2015) in the sense that I am also defining performance through the structure of a loop, but I am more focused on the fannish actions that get repeated and transferred corporeally than the feedback loop used to create a consistent story or character, even though one would inform the other.

Though I delve into the specifics of looping transference in my chapters, to explain overall more concretely what I mean, let me provide a small example. Take a gif on Tumblr. A gif is a short, repeating moving image clip taken from a longer one, compressed into the lossless “.gif” format. Their widespread popularity in digital media is due to them being “fast, cheap, and good” (Bakhshi 2016) – i.e. fast and easy to make, do not take up a lot of space, do not require specialized equipment, and provide an immediacy in expressing ideas and emotions. Gifs have become almost synonymous with media fandoms on the microblogging platform Tumblr, where much of the EXO and *Free!* fanworks were created. The gif, at its base level, is a loop of content. The snippet of content—usually heavily focused on bodily movement such as facial expressions or small gestures—repeats, in a loop, over and over. Gifs are fannish in that they emphasize what fans draw from the object, what tiny gestures they observed through close,

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<sup>11</sup> GamerGate was a large-scale, coordinated effort online where a certain subset of male gamers organized to harass and dox prominent female games journalists and critics.

<sup>12</sup> During the Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. in June 2020, K-pop fans disrupted police surveillance tools online by spamming reporting apps with images and videos of idols. They also hijacked and flooded white supremacist hashtags on Twitter and registered for then-President Trump’s June 20, 2020, rally in Tulsa, OK, to artificially inflate the numbers. U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez also tweeted her support of K-pop fans’ actions. Also, teens on TikTok were credited with similar actions (Dodson 2020).

emotionally-invested watching over and over. These tiny moments then get repeated in loop form, for more close watching. However, these gifs also represent moments of fan consumption—what fans found exciting or appealing about the object is captured in the gif and any accompanying commentary the fan might add, usually through hashtag or text that represents their embodied reaction (from sounds like “aahhhh!” to a glut of hashtags that perform the immediate, excited keyboard pounding that happened when making or reblogging the gif).

With the looped content goes the looping of embodied fan consumption; the gif does not only represent the object, but the moment of audience reception and reaction. However, a gif really only becomes a fandom practice if it shared and spread, and on a microblog like Tumblr, the “reblog” function (represented by two arrows looping on each other) is one of the main ways people create content by re-posting other people’s posts. Through the loop of reblogging, gifs are spread in wider loops, with fans repeating a fan’s previous performance and adding their own embodied commentary. In summary, fans extract bits of media, looping the content of that media; in replaying that content, they perform their own embodied fannishness; and then those performances and practices are spread throughout the community, becoming larger performances that other fans contribute to. Specifically, looping transference is a movement from body-to-body, as fans learn from each other and repeat performances, creating shared practices. Those performances can also loop so much they become part of the object; for example, fan reaction videos (recorded, embodied reactions to a fannish object that are uploaded on YouTube; see Chapter One) are now a common practice of K-pop idols, or how conventions developed in fan made dating game parodies (fan made video games that poke fun at certain romantic tropes in anime; see Chapter Three) are now included in dating games made by video game companies.

By focusing on looping transference, I foreground corporeal movement as an often-overlooked aspect of transnational transmedia, particularly online. While many theorists have argued that digital media is in fact *not* disembodied (Hayles 1999; Thacker 2004; Hansen 2006), I follow Lisa Parks’ (2004) call for an interrogation of the ideology of movement epistemologies online. She notes how movement online is inscribed with early idealizations of the internet as limitless freedom, and how users are often framed as “navigators,” which indicates that users control their seamless movement through the web interface, giving the sensation of instant, unlimited travel, and equal knowledge acquisition. Parks argues how idealized conceptions of movement online belie the structural inequities of computer and internet infrastructures that impact certain bodies over others (such as those who work at computer disposal sites). Lisa Nakamura (2007), Wendy Chun (2006), and Aubrey Anable (2018) also demonstrate how users’ bodies online are always gendered and racialized. In other words, *whose* body is doing the moving matters. So, while I focus on fannish movement, I am not claiming that fannishness subsumes all other bodily experiences fans may have. Rather, I analyze how looping transference is a predominant method transnational fans use to circulate these media objects, express their identity as transnational fans, and discuss cross-cultural issues and agency within globalized media consumption. In attending to specific instances of fannish movement and how they intersect with fans multiplicitous identities and locales, I ask what the political potential of embodied movement truly is within transnational media ecologies.

## Case Studies and Looped Movements

Through four specific case studies pertaining to anime and K-pop fandom, this dissertation charts performances of transnational fandom that exemplify how tensions around

global audience participation are acted out through embodied movement. While I do not want to gloss over or dismiss the historical specificity around anime and K-pop as cultural productions from Japan and South Korea, my intention is to also show how important transnational production networks have been to the formation of these global media. Therefore, by focusing specific case studies, I can attend to the specific histories that led up to those moments, but also show the impact transnational fandom has had on them.

As my case studies revolve around the triangular relationship between Japan, South Korea, and the United States from roughly 2012-2017—with a heavy emphasis on English-speaking fandom—there will always be points of view not considered. It is not my goal to be comprehensive, but rather to take up a few productive nodes that illustrate transnational fandom movement and co-creation. However, I would like to acknowledge that fan studies scholars have raised concerns in recent years about the dominance of Western-centric studies on fandom, and anime and K-pop scholars alike have also criticized the amount of importance placed on the United States when studying transnational media. While I cannot claim my study veers away from transnational fans in the U.S., what it does add is the way fans wrestle with U.S. hegemony within global media circulation and U.S. cultural imperialism. My studies show how fans are aware of the uneven influence, production, and distribution certain countries and geographical areas have in anime and K-pop media ecologies, and the strategies they employ to try and potentially correct that unevenness.

My chapters are titled based on the specific fandom movements that are looped and transferred in each case study. Chapter One, “Reacting,” examines how fans become objects of fascination themselves, through an analysis of K-pop fan reaction videos. Reaction videos are recorded, first-time reactions to an object and are a popular category of video on the YouTube platform. They are a noted phenomenon within global K-pop fandom, with K-pop fans recording their reactions to K-pop music videos. However, opposed to previous theories on reaction videos that centralize disbelief and shock as reaction videos’ core affects, I focus on select popular K-pop fan YouTubers to theorize *fan* reactions. Fan reactions engage in what I call a *full body analysis*, which is neither completely uncontrolled nor tempered, but a multivalent, sensory conversation that creates both fandom and object in the unfolding of encounter. K-pop fan reaction videos offer insight into one prevalent way that transnational fandom is constructed and shared by corporeal performances online that foregrounds fandom as the main object of consumption. Reactors’ performance as transnational fans become an affective currency, valued by entertainment companies for their promotion of K-pop and valued by fans for their performance of effusive fandom. However, fandom discussions about reactions also reveal how certain fans are expected to “react” in particular racial and gendered ways, showing how covert racism, anti-Blackness, and homophobia circulate as well within this transnational practice.

My second chapter, “Crossing,” turns to theatre and engages with the musical *KPOP*, which was produced in 2017 in New York City. The show questions how K-pop can succeed in the United States and engages its attending audiences through an interactive format, weaving digital K-pop culture in with live theatre. However, as the show grapples with this question, I approach it through its Asian American characters and link them to Asian American K-pop parody group Boys Generally Asian (BgA). I argue that BgA utilizes fan performance and K-pop to perform Asian American identity as a crossover state, which is made up of the numerous flows, adjustments, and crosses a body has taken, both virtual and physical. Through its immersive multimedia structure, *KPOP* reveals how the complex and racialized intertwining of

mediated idol and mediated audience complicates the performance of Asian and Asian American identity, and ultimately leads its audience to a different space than an "us versus them" binary.

In the second half of the dissertation, I turn to objects more associated with anime and Japan. Chapter Three, "Dating," takes up a genre of video games called dating game that are a central part of anime subculture. Dating games are video games that focus on romantic storylines, where the player tries to romance every potential partner in repeated playthroughs. In this chapter, I formalize and focus on a fannish sub-genre of dating games, called dating game parodies. Dating game parodies take up the common tropes of dating games, subverting romanceable characters and what counts as a happy ending, and many of them are independently produced by fans of the genre. Due to Japanese popular culture's heavy influence on these games, it is my contention that creators have turned dating games parodies into a transnational practice that queers normative romantic expectations, but always in relation to flows of Asian media. Through analyzing common techniques within the parodies *Hatoful Boyfriend* (2011) and *Tusks: The Orc Dating Sim* (2015), I build on queer scholarship from Mel Y. Chen (2012) and Bonnie Ruberg (2019) to show how these games perform what Ruberg calls "re-gamification," or the practice of visualizing the unspoken rules that shape expectations for gender and sexuality. I argue that through their parody structure, these games illustrate how tightly woven race, sexuality, and representations of non-humans are in determining which lives are considered more valuable, but that through queer game design they upend those hierarchies and emphasize the potential of re-performing non-normative intimacies.

My final chapter, "Looping," investigates the material body's role in a transnational environment, through the multilingual play *God Bless Baseball*. Written by Japanese playwright Okada Toshiki, this production was a transnational theatre collaboration between Japanese and Korean actors and deals with the two countries' relation to the United States through the mediation of baseball. While not directly focusing on a K-pop or anime object, this chapter shows how the widespread their media ecologies are, and how the practices and performances discussed in previous chapters inform another transnational medium (baseball). Through a close analysis of affective movement within *God Bless Baseball* – movement that is stuttering, seeming disconnected from text, and inspired by the corporeal loops of baseball, YouTube, and Butoh alike – I argue the play reveals transnational bodies as entities that are not continuous nor singular, but ones that reassemble and disassemble, attuning themselves on a sliding scale of ambivalent identity. Out of this recombinative movement emerges the potential for a different kind of relation to the affective environment of global American imperialism. However, instead of presenting a narrative of complete liberation, *God Bless Baseball*'s movement opens to a relationality that emphasizes care and de-centers national identities.

My conclusion takes up the fan debates and criticism around the American Netflix adaptation of *Death Note* (2017) as one final case study that shows the power, visibility, and circulation of transnational fandom. Transnational fans' upset with the American adaptation of an already-popular, transnational manga and anime show their rejection of a glocalized object that was supposed to be made "for them," as the previous film adaptations of *Death Note* had been produced in Japan. This brief case study shows how transnational fandom asserts its visibility and how their performances can potentially shift industry practices. At the center of all my investigations, embodied performances are indispensable modes of inquiry to understand how fans interrogate fixed notions of nationality, race, and gender, and form transnational, networked collectives. These collectives point to the uneven, messy, and simultaneous overlaps

of transnational identity, but also suggest modes of community building that do not rely on binary constructions or solid borders.

## Chapter One

### Reacting: Full Body Analysis in K-pop Fan Reaction Videos

On May 30, 2018, popular YouTuber JRE (short for “Just Random Everyday”) uploaded a video entitled “Something I need to say.” In the video, JRE thanks his fans to commemorate his channel, JREKML, hitting one million subscribers, which is a significant benchmark signaling channel popularity and growth, acknowledged by YouTube through a literal shiny, gold plaque. The camera is trained on the 28-year-old’s face, and the composition conveys a sense of intimacy and sincerity, as there is nothing else to distract the viewer from JRE’s expressions of gratitude as he exclaims “this would not have happened” without his fans. JRE has built his entire channel on this sense of sincerity and unmediated response; he is a K-pop fan reactor, which means he records his “real time” responses as he watches K-pop music videos (MVs). The music video is visible in a smaller inset somewhere on screen, but the focus is on all of JRE’s facial expressions, verbal exclamations, and bodily gestures. This kind of video falls under the popular YouTube category of “reaction videos.” While the Fine Brothers (FBE, now REACT Media) were one of the first channels to popularize reaction videos on YouTube, a genre where people film themselves reacting to unknown objects, JRE and numerous K-pop fans like him occupy the space of being *fan* reactors; they do not try to create shocking or funny reaction set-ups, but rather film their reactions to K-pop *as fans* to share with other fans. This framing shifts the focus of their reaction videos, creating a category of what I call “fan reactions.”

As K-pop has grown in transnational popularity at a rapid pace, so too have the number of K-pop fan reaction channels, to the point where the more popular reactors have merchandise and sponsorships, are frequent guests at K-pop conventions, partner with Korean entertainment, and even meet K-pop idols. As media scholar Michelle Cho puts it, reaction videos occupy a central space in K-pop fandom: “The genre of popular music called K-pop has established a visible presence on the Web both as a corporate pop-culture commodity and as a rich and complex participatory video culture that *centers on the ‘reaction video’*” (2017, 241, emphasis mine). A YouTube search for reactions to K-pop groups will yield results in the hundreds of thousands (for example, a search for “Blackpink reaction” gives 356,000 results), and if the group is very popular the results can be in the millions (for current mega-group BTS, reactions videos to their music videos number about 5,910,000).<sup>1</sup> For Cho, K-pop reaction videos show how performative K-pop itself is, as a “transcultural spectacle that *moves* or affectively touches the viewer” (2017, 241). K-pop’s performative quality is crucial for conceptualizing K-pop as more than a music genre; it is a genre of performance that includes dance, band member personas, interviews, other media appearances, narrative scripting by managers and companies, *and*, as Cho emphasizes, performances that fans create in response to the bands.

I open this dissertation with the phenomenon of K-pop fan reaction videos because they are a prime example of a predominant fan practice where transnational fandom is the main object consumed by fans, K-pop idols, and non-fans. The expansive numbers and circulation of these videos, along with the celebritization (that is, the making into celebrities) of popular reactors work to perform (and form) transnational K-pop fandom. A reaction video is a filmed reaction to *something*, and its appeal lies in the ostensibly unmediated, embodied response to whatever is being watched. This seemingly simple premise belies the numerous intersections of affect,

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<sup>1</sup> Most fans will target specific groups to react to rather than “K-pop” generally, the latter of which is more likely to happen with non-fans watching various groups for the first time. Some of these numbers will inevitably include non-fans as well.

performance, and transnational circulation that K-pop fan reaction videos demonstrate. What K-pop fan reaction videos offer is an opportunity to look at a collective fandom practice that is specifically transnational, as scholars have noted that K-pop reaction videos are mostly in English and filmed by non-Korean K-pop fans.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is important to note that these videos do not represent all of K-pop fandom, but they offer insight into one prevalent way that transnational fandom is constructed and shared by corporeal performances online, and what exactly about these performances is valued. Significantly, K-pop fan reaction videos represent a transnational practice that foregrounds fandom as the main object of consumption; for those outside of fandom, fandom is no longer seen as an ancillary offshoot of the object, working in the background; it *is* the object for a variety of audiences around the globe. Through analysis of popular K-pop reactors, this chapter will look at how these videos illustrate a complex performance of fannish affect through what I call full-body analysis, how fans evaluate “sincere” fan reactions in ways that intersect with race, gender, and sexuality, and how the K-pop industry has co-opted fan reaction videos and reactors’ bodies as signs of affective currency in their transnational circulation.

What K-pop fan reaction videos suggest for broader media consumption, however, is that we need a theory of (shared) reactions. As the “reaction video” has become a genre of its own, with a YouTube search of “reaction video” yielding hundreds of millions results (812,000,000), we need to take seriously this shared practice of reacting, or what might be described as *forming* a response in the moment. Much scholarly literature on reaction videos distinguishes between reactions as “passive” – something that is immediate, seemingly impulsive, personal, and fleeting – and the video production portion as “active,” in that the reactor is producing the video. Communications scholar Yeran Kim argues that this means K-pop reactors hold multiple roles at once, as they are both simultaneously passive and active (2015, 333). What makes reaction videos unique for Kim is that while fan reactors make videos, and therefore “actively” produce a *thing*, the emphasis, source of wonder, and amusement in the video is the seemingly passive consumption.

However, an audience’s reaction to a piece of media is wholly concerned with the activities of meaning-making, interpretation, and reading the significance of that media. The argument that audiences are active in their performance *as audience* has been taken up by many cultural scholars, but particularly John Fiske, who emphasizes the process of meaning-making as political, where people negotiate (make sense of) distributed power structures in the world ([1987] 2010, 14). Many in fandom studies follow this line of thought, and debate where the division of active and passive lies in fannish behavior, and if it can exist at all. Despite this, media fans are usually defined by their level of productivity, their ability to produce *something* beyond consumption, such as fan fiction, fan art, cosplay, etc. Even for Fiske, who argues that fans and general audiences are on a spectrum in the same category, fans “often turn this semiotic productivity [meaning-making] into some form of textual production that can circulate among – and thus help define – the fan community” (1992, 30), which means that even though fans are part of a general audience, they are seen as being particularly active and this kind of productivity defines them. There seems to be a tension as to the place of what Jonathan Gray, Cornell

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of this writing, there are a handful of noted Korean-language fan reactors, therefore I cannot say that reaction videos are an entirely international fan phenomenon. However, my research and others’ indicates that most K-pop reaction videos are in English, from fans outside of Korea, and will even be subtitled in Korean and other languages so non-English-speaking viewers can watch them.

Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington call the “watchers” or “lurkers,” or people who are fans, but only “look” and do not participate in traditional fannish activities (2007, 10).

Some might not classify reactions themselves in the category of meaning-making at all, as interpretation and meaning-making imply a lengthier process of revision to one’s thoughts and a tempering of the emotions that burst forth in a reaction. For media scholar Vilem Flusser, reactions do not fall into the category of meaning-making because they are reactive; that is, there is a very clear cause and effect between the thing that causes the reaction and the reaction itself, and therefore it is not an intentional act (2014, 2).<sup>3</sup> Performance studies scholars have long recognized that actions do not need to be intentional to convey meaning, but the wordings around *reactions* specifically (and not “actions” generally) show how the reaction is not only classified as a response, but classified as an uncontrollable response, and overall, a *bad* response. How many self-help articles have encouraged us to “respond, not react”? The real tension with reactions is their uncontrollable quality, their excess, and the possible danger of saying or doing something *wrong*. They may fall under what Sianne Ngai has classified as “ugly feelings,” which are sets of negative feelings considered “lesser” or weaker (envy, paranoia, irritation) than powerful feelings, such as anger. Though reactions are often sudden and can come in powerful bursts, I would argue that their tendency to be dismissed as petty, unimportant, and *bad* aligns them with this category of ugly feelings. This is where the stakes of reactions come in; for if we are to think of reactions as containing “ugly feelings” (even if the feelings expressed are not “ugly”), then *whose* reactions are considered appropriate? Whose do we value more? How do we govern and restrict and tamp down these reactions, which are one of our most daily practices? And as reactions have been formalized and shared in reaction videos, what does it mean for certain bodies to *not* tamp down, but rather collectively react?

## Method and Tensions

In this chapter, I use three fan reactors as my jumping-off point: JRE of the channel JREKML and Cortney and Jasmine from the channel 2MinJinkJongKey. While other reactors and fans will be featured in the chapter, JRE, Cortney, and Jasmine are a useful touchstone because they illustrate both the shared traits and the spectrum of difference between K-pop fan reactors. Both channels have consistently uploaded reaction videos since 2012, the early days for K-pop fan reaction videos.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, these reactors are highly visible within the fandom and they are regularly invited as special guests to KCON (a large-scale, international K-pop convention). However, they represent two different types of K-pop reactor channels. JRE represents how reactors can become celebrities with high quality production, merchandise, and potential professional work within the K-pop industry, and he is arguably the most popular reactor at the time of this writing, based on subscriptions (1.2 million subscribers) and the partnering work he has done in K-pop industry. He also manages another YouTube channel and a Twitch channel, branching out into other types of media besides K-pop reactions. Cortney and Jasmine fall toward the other end of the spectrum that is consistent with earlier theorizations of reaction videos that rely on the aesthetics ordinariness and amateurism (Kim 2015, 337). Their

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<sup>3</sup> I should note that Flusser is specifically forming his theory of gestures here and argues that reactions cannot be gestures. He defines gestures as movements of the body or tools connected to the body for which there is “no satisfactory causal explanation” (2014, 2), and therefore, they are representative of a state of mind and concerned with meaning and interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> As JRE said in a Q&A video, “When I started there were like, five K-pop channels” (JREKML 2016).

uploading schedule is not as consistent, they have a more low-fi aesthetic with less expensive filming equipment (and therefore grainier videos) and no professional lighting, and the selection of idols they react to is much smaller. Reaction videos are not a revenue stream for them, as none of their videos are monetized.

These channels do not separate that easily either; as stated, both have visibility within fandom and the K-pop industry, and therefore Cortney and Jasmine do tread the line of celebrity. Though JRE has slicker production and merchandise, he has built his brand on reactions – the territory of unmediated emotion – so “ordinariness,” and the assumption that he is an ordinary, sincere fan, more like his audience than the celebrity idols, is a part of his work. Reactors occupy an in-between space of “fan” (amateur) and “producer” (professional) (Kim 2015, 340), so the differences between JRE and Cortney and Jasmine offer a sliding scale of possibilities within fan reaction videos, rather than sharp distinctions. More so, they offer different pathways into a more complex analysis of the role of fan performance in popular culture, and the multiple roles fans come to perform as audiences desire their reactions.

Importantly, I do not claim these reactors speak for or represent K-pop fandom as a whole. While fandom scholars generally agree that affect plays a large part in fandom, and particularly in K-pop fandom, claiming one shared affect has the potential to obscure all the uneven, specific, (trans)cultural relationships within transnational fandoms. This danger lurks in literature on reaction videos as well; in talking about the appeal of reaction videos, Sam Anderson (2011) argues for the “universality” of reaction videos, which stitches together a fantasy of shared global response. However, scholars like Cho, Kim, and David C. Oh caution against perpetuating a “universal” within reaction videos because of their uneven distribution and dominance of English-speaking reactors, particularly those in the United States. Claiming that these reactors represent a “universal” fandom experience re-inscribes hierarchies of U.S. media, where the U.S. experience is considered default, and obscures viewpoints from non-English-speaking K-pop fans or those in places where YouTube is not a dominant platform. Additionally, other intersecting identities and local contexts permeate the umbrella category of “fan,” which means that talking about “fandom” without considering where fans are from, how they identify, and how their performances fit in with global distribution leaves a large part of the story untold. The promotion of certain K-pop reactors by entertainment companies creates a highly visible, yet selected, image of transnational K-pop fandom.

This tension also lies in the opposing direction as well; reaction videos *are* a shared practice across national borders in K-pop fandom, giving sense to a wider, if imperfect, transnational K-pop community, which is also recognized by the K-pop industry. Trying to silo fan reactors into distinct national subgroups within K-pop fandom is tricky and also seems imperfect, considering that reaction videos and reactors themselves circulate transnationally, becoming significant figures beyond national borders. Additionally, nationality does not always account for other divisions within fandom by race, gender, or sexuality, and these conversations happen on both a local and transnational scale. For example, fan reactors Cortney and Jasmine’s video on “Why We Don’t Like the N Word” (CortneysCorner 2014) begins with a discussion of how one specific K-pop idol used the n-word in an interview, but then branches into the use of the n-word in K-pop music, fandom, and arguments surrounding the n-word both in the United States and abroad. These seemingly local issues, tensions, and discussions within fandom circulate transnationally, and therefore cannot be argued to be discretely “American,” “Korean,” etc. What K-pop fan reaction videos do, then, is show how transnational fandom is both framed

as entertainment, and how fans negotiate being imperfectly transnational, containing a multitude of relations to idols, fandom, and industry.

As fan reaction videos expose the tensions between active and passive consumption and also universality and transnationalism, throughout this chapter I identify several other tensions that “reactions” bring up in order to situate them specifically within K-pop fandom and within the wider fields of performance and media studies. First, I define fan reaction videos specifically as shared, fannish actions, to separate them from non-fannish reactions that rely on disorientation. Then I delve into a longer history of fannish reactions and how they expose tensions around bodily reactions as irrational. I then move into my concept of full body analysis as a fannish method of critique that transfers from body-to-body transnationally. However, *whose* body is reacting matters to fans and viewers, so I also show how fan reactions surface tensions around race within K-pop fandom. I conclude with a consideration of how reactors circulate transnationally through conventions, and how their bodies have become nodes of affective currency and spectacle within K-pop as a whole.

### A Definition of Fan Reaction Videos

A reaction video in its broadest sense is a recorded reaction to *something*. Formats may vary, but in general, the reactor or reactors show themselves encountering an object for the first time and recording their reactions. Most of the time, the object is shown in the video as well. However, this style of video on YouTube has grown so large that we can no longer classify all reaction videos under the same general umbrella. We must consider the context around the reactions, because it is integral to the way we view and judge the reactors and the responses they have. I make a distinction between non-fan reactions and fan reactions, where the former is an encounter with an unknown object and the latter is not.

A non-fan reaction video usually indicates an encounter with a completely unknown object. “Kids React To Payphones” (REACT, 2017) assumes that contemporary children would not know what a payphone is, which makes their encounter one of bewilderment, shock, and disorientation. Sam Anderson (2011) traces the reaction video’s inception to the infamous Brazilian porn clip, “2 Girls 1 Cup,” which was said to be unwatchable due to coprophagia.<sup>5</sup> The reaction videos allowed people to watch something taboo by proxy, because in these videos, the source material (“2 Girls 1 Cup”) was *not* present on screen and watchers only saw the reactors’ reactions. Cho reads Anderson’s claim as a solution to “watching that which is evocative in the extreme and, thus, incomprehensible” (2017, 248), and therefore the idea of incomprehensibility and the need of a mediator is central to the idea of non-fan reaction videos.

Some reaction videos to K-pop do operate in this fashion and for Cho, reveal the genre’s overdetermined heritage of colonial visual politics, “for those who identify the spectacle of K-pop as a foreign object that requires the mediation of others’ responses to understand or to collectively neutralize, or both” (2017, 249). Her use of non-fan reaction videos to PSY’s viral “Gangnam Style” are a prime example. Though PSY’s video went unexpectedly viral, for many, the contents of the video were inscrutable because they contained references that only those familiar with Korean culture (the Gangnam area in Seoul, specifically) and Korean popular culture could grasp. Cho describes how a compilation video of “Gangnam Style” reactions portrays the reactors as dumbfounded, reduced to “shock, laughter, sighs, and exclamations” in

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<sup>5</sup> According to KnowYourMeme.com, the 2006 “Nintendo Sixty-FOOOOOOOOOOUR” video uploaded by raw64life is the first reaction video.

the face of something they find unreadable, which would be PSY's outrageous, yet culturally specific, video (2017, 246). The music video is seen as so foreign and unreadable to a primarily Western audience (the reactors), that incredulous reactions to it become a further source of entertainment, softening the "blunt force of direct viewing" (2017, 249).

However, this mode of complete bewilderment does not cover all reaction videos and I use the term "fan reaction videos" to indicate one specific sub-genre. Fan reaction videos imply that the reactor knows about what they are watching, and they will know information a non-fan does not. A K-pop fan would not respond the way a non-K-pop fan (stereo) typically does to a music video; for example, in many K-pop reaction videos like "YouTubers React to K-pop" (REACT 2013), non-fan reactors often say things like, "Is this the girl from PSY's music video?" or joke that the boys look like girls, issues that show both an unfamiliarity with K-pop overall, but also display deeper-seated prejudice toward Asians from a so-called Western gaze, such as the notion that all Asians look alike or that Asian men are effeminate (see also Yoon 2018). Fan reactors, however, will know the names of the group members and the groups' histories and other songs. Even if K-pop fan reactors do not know the specific group whose video they are reacting to, they will understand at least some parts of the K-pop industry, which gives them more context than a non-fan. They will also assume a shared audience (K-pop fans) that brings their knowledge of the object and converses in the video comments. The shift in spectatorial position, from stunned non-fan to engaged fan, recodes the value of reaction videos, as the value moves from the performance of reception to the performance of *fan* reception; or rather, the object becomes the performance of fandom and of shared fannish affect.

The anticipation of fannish reaction is shown right from the beginning of a K-pop fan reaction video. Generally, these videos begin with an introduction where the reactor says what they are going to be reacting to and expresses some degree of anticipation. For example, in Cortney and Jasmine's intro for SHINee's "Everybody," they express excitement to the point that they say they do not *need* an intro: "I don't think an intro is really... *needed* at a time like this... you know what we're about to do; WE know what we're about to do. Uhm... I don't know if we're gonna be *living* past these next... how many minutes?" (2MinJinkJongKey 2013). Many of their videos begin with a scrolling warning at the bottom of the screen "DON'T WATCH ON FULL VOLUME," because of the amount of screaming that happens, which adds to the excitement of certain videos. The anticipation here is not for the idols, but rather for the fan and their anticipated reaction, and these introductions frame fan reactions as an event to be watched and enjoyed. From the start of a K-pop fan reaction video, one knows that the reactors are not simply going to "watch" the video; they will fannishly react to it and that is what is anticipated rather than a general "response."

These introductions also point to the specifics of fandom at that time, which indicates the shared nature of reaction videos. For an example, JRE says in an intro for one of his favorite group's songs (Big Bang, "Bang Bang Bang"), "Phew... oh, shit... I don't know, 'Loser' and 'Bae Bae' I didn't – I never felt this way, but *this one*... I don't know, just because the title and the teasers looked so fuckin' dope – I don't know, I don't – all right, that's enough..." (JREKML 2015). Not every reaction done by one reactor will be the same, even if it is toward their favorite group. This is partially true because people's reactions are individual, but also because it is dependent on context, the *moment* in fandom. Both SHINee's "Everybody" and Big Bang's "Bang Bang Bang" were highly anticipated comebacks for both groups, and those songs received a lot of hype prior to release. Therefore, the anticipatory introduction (and often subsequent reaction) is bigger, and the feelings the reactors express are shared with a larger audience who

understands the anticipation. Fan reaction videos give the particular fannish context at that time, as reactors often will not “catch up” the audience and simply speak about events and releases as if the viewer was in an ongoing conversation with them, and the introduction to these videos serve as an anticipation for that moment in time.

Reactors still keep their connection to fandom as they move into the reacting portion of the video, where they watch the K-pop MV and give their unfiltered commentary. Visually, the reactor is still the main image as the music video is positioned somewhere on the screen in miniature; Cortney and Jasmine place it bottom-center, JRE usually places it in the top-right corner. It is clear from this set-up that the reactions and bodies of the fans are the dominant show, as they are the bigger, centered image and the smaller music video is only to show what they are reacting to in real time. During these sections, reactors invite and participate in conversation with fandom, pulling attention to themselves. JRE will look at his camera often when something strange or “awesome” happens, as if to conspire with the audience, and has said that he began uploading reaction videos because he wanted to “see if other people were like me,” or rather, to see if there were other people who liked K-pop as he did (JREKML 2016). This indicates that the seemingly simple and personal act of consumption in K-pop is collective, as JRE could not even *react* without sharing. Cortney and Jasmine react together as fans, continually conversing with each other and gesturing toward their shared audience, and many fan reactors will react in groups to demonstrate their shared affinity.<sup>6</sup> As the videos shift into the territory of prevalent fan practice, the emphasis moves to that of fannishness; of familiarity and conversation on a deep, embodied level and sharing with a wider fandom.

### **A History of Fan Reactions: Fangirls and Reality Television**

Thinking of K-pop fan reaction videos as shared and fannish then allows us to situate them within a longer history of fandom reactions in media, and the different tensions they surface in relation to gender, bodies, authenticity, and modes of critique. Though K-pop fan reactors harness the “new” media of YouTube, rather than view these videos as an entirely new fandom activity, I view them as exemplars of “fangirling” as a practice, as both reaction videos and fangirls knit together explosive reactions, visible performances in extraordinary numbers, and pop idol fandom. The term typically indicates young, female fans, but more importantly, definitions of and discussions about fangirls position them, as E. Maguire notes, as “out of control, consumed by emotion,” which implies that “the texts that fangirls obsess over are trivial, low-quality, and not to be taken ‘seriously’” (2018, 113-4). While Maguire and other fangirl scholars are quick to note that the term has been taken up or applied to people of varying ages and genders, whether as a reclamation of identity or as an insult, it is still coded as feminine and defined by a *wholly emotional reaction*, which is then framed as obsessed, inappropriate, and “crazy” (a word so heavily associated with fangirls it features in headlines and documentaries such as *Crazy About One Direction*). In being framed as uncontrollable, numerous, and performing a highly visible fan identity, one could say that fangirls are the original reactors.

K-pop fan reaction videos fall into this lineage, of showing large numbers of seemingly uncontrollable bodily reactions to demonstrate the power of the object. These videos perform not a general fannish affect but fangirling as a specific practice; how encountering the object (even if the object is not physically present) is enough to shoot the body into differently directions. For

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<sup>6</sup> JRE’s channel name, JREKML, is both his and his cousin’s name because they often react together. However, JRE is the one who consistently uploads and reacts.

example, Cortney and Jasmine will sometimes literally stop videos in a moment of embodied reaction (such as a hand shooting out and pounding the space bar to stop the video), often when idols are overtly sexual, as if it is too much for them to handle. In SHINee's "Everybody" (2013), member Taemin is shown shirtless a couple of times. When this part pops up, Cortney screams, flailing her arms to stop the video, as she backs away from the computer in her rolling chair. Jasmine falls off to the side, and then laughs saying, "that was the best scream I've ever heard in my life" (2MinJinkJongKey 2013). As she lets her reaction subside, Cortney moves the chair around in the background, behind Jasmine, as if embarrassed, and eventually wheels back to her spot. The physicality of her reaction and subsequent need to hide shows that fan reactions are fully embodied, corporeal performances of fannishness, and perhaps perform something that is considered embarrassing or not appropriate – an awareness of the "ugly feelings" fandom reactions produce within wider cultural context.

Images, videos, and news reports of fangirling depict female fans as uncontrollable, held partly in awe, partly in fear, because you never know what they are going to do next and the best we (as bystanders) can do is try and corral the horde into cleared pathways. Jasmine commends Cortney on her fangirling, slightly joking, "That was the best scream I've ever heard," as if Cortney's body just did something amazing (*the best scream*). Yet in another moment like this one, a reaction to EXO's "Call Me Baby," Cortney flails her arms, accidentally hitting Jasmine. Jasmine says to Cortney, "*you punched my hand*" indicating the sometimes-injurious consequences of fanning too hard (2MinJinkJongKey 2015), signaling the dual-tension within fangirls as they are framed – both frivolous (and perhaps somewhat impressive) and dangerous. While reaction videos show individual reactions and the *process* of fanning out, their numbers show that K-pop fan reactions are a shared, fandom practice, totaling what could only be described as a wave of reactions. It is only that the group performance inhabits a networked, virtual space rather than a physical concert or airport space (though K-pop fans gather at those places too). More than any other fannish archetype, the reaction video falls in with the legacy of the fangirl, illustrating the embodiment of what it means to be a fan, through spectacular, visible, whole body reactions.

Scholarship on fangirls also reveals the ways gender is tied to the framing of reactions. The fact that the object of derision is a *fangirl* signals the long historical trajectory of dismissing women's emotions and viewing them as wholly emotional creatures without rational control over their feelings or bodies. There have been many studies on the ways mass media derides fangirls, which functions as an attempt to control young girls' behavior. And while I use the term "fangirl" to show K-pop fan reaction videos are in the legacy of the fangirl image, obviously women are not the only ones reacting to K-pop in such a way and they are not the only ones subjected to derision over what are considered more feminine and excessive reactions. I should note that in K-pop fandom, the term "fanboy" is used along with "fangirl" to indicate the same kind of reaction, which is an emotional fanning out. However, "fanboy" has had varied definitions and connotations within other fandoms. Macquire points out that fanboys are sometimes characterized in opposition to and antagonistic toward fangirls; for example, the misogynist campaign Gamergate had male video game fans harassing and endangering female video game fans, particularly certain women in the industry (2018, 112). Fanboys are also commonly characterized by not fitting into normative ideas of masculinity, and are portrayed as losers, loners, and sexually unattractive. However, for K-pop fandom, there does not seem to be so much a pitting of male fans against female fans, but rather reaction videos are judged based on *who* is reacting in relation to gender, race, and sexuality. Since this is such a complex topic, I

will be unpacking how fan reaction videos are framed regarding gender and race within fandom in the second half of this chapter.

Fangirls are not always objects of derision, and some scholars have pointed out the ways that fangirls have power, most notably as symbols of economic buying power, as large numbers of fangirls are used as “proof” of the power and popularity of an object. Darlene Hampton notes how fangirls of transnational media, like Chinese female fans of the BBC’s television drama *Sherlock* (2010), have been figured in media to represent entire nations’ relations, such as the British press using the Chinese fangirls as proof of positive Chinese-British relations (2016, 234). Fangirls become more than just fans of their objects, they become fans of entire nations (as figured by the press), their bodies used as proof/currency in soft power trade, which shows how the fangirl is a transnational image. Coverage on K-pop is not immune to this “proof by fan,” and both within South Korea and abroad articles on the uncontrollable, passionate fervor of K-pop fans are used to prove the global popularity of K-pop. However, the issue with these portrayals of power is that the framing is often done by those outside fandom, who still represent fangirls as irrational and delusional, just with deep pockets.

Maguire offers another, more positive formulation of fangirl power, through popular blogger and *Rookie* magazine founder Tavi Gevinson. Gevinson reclaimed fangirling for herself as a way of explaining identity formation, calling fangirls a “set of eyes” that are cultural “scribes,” scrutinizing content around them, making their own world and personal identity out of an amalgamation of various sources (2018, 118). The power of this statement lies in deflecting attention from the fangirl body, as an object of surveillance, and putting emphasis on the fangirl’s expression of self. While I think this *is* one way fangirls reclaim their practice, there is a way it tries to bring fangirling into the realm of the rational and *out* of the body, as something that is deliberate and feels more distant because this scribal process implies reflection and careful consideration, disembodied by its focus on mental-visual processing through small segments of the body. Due to the valid concern of objectifying and surveilling girls’ bodies, this attempt to show them as powerful makes the fangirl body something to ignore.

More recently pop idol fangirling and overall audience reactions have taken on a more mainstream and commercial aspect within a myriad of reality television competition shows such as *American Idol* (2002-2016; 2018-present), *Britain’s Got Talent* (2007-present), and *Dancing with the Stars* (2005-present), where audience votes partially determine who continues in the show. One could say that audience reaction drives the outcome in these shows, at least in theory. (Though Henry Jenkins [2006] points out the various ways fans suspect not all their votes get counted on *American Idol*.) Reactions are also emphasized in the strategies that producers and contestants use to try to elicit certain reactions from the audience in hopes of garnering more votes; Gunn Sara Enli (2009) argues that these shows run on a fascination with the “authentic” and trying to present contestants in the most “ordinary” way as possible, in order for the audience to feel more of a connection with them. As previously discussed, fan reaction videos thrive on the idea of the ordinary and authentic as well—just ordinary fans reacting unfiltered and bearing their true feelings—though with reality competition shows, the contestants are trying to appear simultaneously ordinary to create an affective relationship and transcend their ordinariness by becoming stars.

Though these differences exist, reality competition shows with heavy audience involvement place reactions front and center. Audience reactions are shown visually often through live audiences, but also in the form of votes and other discussions outside the show such as message boards, tweets, etc. A striking example is from the spring 2009 season of *Britain’s*

*Got Talent*, when an unemployed Susan Boyle stunned judges and audience members of the show. In her first audience sequence, it is clear how much reaction figures into the judging of the show, both by the professionals and the audience. When Boyle informs the judges that she is 47 years old (on the older side of the contestants), the camera cuts to notoriously blunt judge Simon Cowell, who immediately looks skeptically at the other judges. As Boyle states her dream is to be a professional singer, the camera shows an audience member rolling their eyes—clearly, the audience is skeptical as well, their reactions becoming the focus and building the narrative that Boyle, in this moment, is perhaps *too* ordinary to have any real “talent.” However, when Boyle begins to sing in a truly lovely voice, the camera first cuts to the three judges to show Simon Cowell’s eyebrows climbing up his forehead in shock and Amanda’s Holden’s mouth opening in surprise, and then to the waves of audience members standing up and cheering, all within the first four lines of the song. Though Boyle received the judges’ critique after her song like any other contestant, the real critique happened in that beginning moment of reaction.

### Fan Reactions as Full Body Analysis

Situating K-pop fan reaction videos in the history of the fangirl and reality, talent competition shows allows us to see them as part of a longer media history where reactions hold economic sway and valid critique, along with the host of assumptions that come with *who* is doing the reacting. What K-pop fan reaction videos can add to this history now is an intense focus on full body reactions to take further this idea of reactions as a form of transnational community making, discussion, and critique. I argue that it is essential to consider the whole body and not only the verbalized thoughts in reaction videos. Previous studies of K-pop reaction videos rely on the reactors’ words to show how fans make meaning from the texts.<sup>7</sup> While these studies acknowledge that bodies play a big role in reactions, they are often classified as intense reactions of bodily sensation or quotidian movements that seem to escape meaning beyond uncontrollable reaction, much like how the fangirl becomes a wild, uncontrollable figure. I now turn back to K-pop fan reaction videos and examine their performances in closer detail to formulate reactions as what I call a full body analysis, which is not completely uncontrolled nor tempered, but a multivalent, sensory conversation that creates both transnational fandom and object in the unfolding of encounter.

Full body analysis plays out as detailed conversations between fan, object, and fandom. An example of this would be Courtney and Jasmine’s reaction video for “Ko Ko Bop” by EXO (2017). Courtney and Jasmine pause the MV when member Kai does a dance move that emphasizes his abs, but when they stop, they describe both verbally and physically what it does to their body.

Jasmine: “But when he did that (imitates dance movement) you could literally see each ab go bam, bam, *pew, pew, pew, pew* (does shooting movement, as if it is coming from her abs) ... each ab literally shot me in the chest like (pats her chest)... holy shi...(sighs)” (2MinJinkJongKey 2017).

That moment in the EXO video is only a second (literally), but the attention to detail and attunement that these fans have to K-pop idols’ movements and in turn how that makes their

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<sup>7</sup> An exception being Heather Warren-Crow’s (2016) “Screaming like a girl: viral video and the work of reaction,” which places an emphasis on the vocal and soundscape of reaction videos.

body move indicates an intimate, bodily connection through the screen. As Cortney and Jasmine talk back and forth during this moment, they illustrate a number of different movements; they mimic Kai's movement, they gesturally and verbally (*bam bam!*) recount their reaction, and they play off each other, affirming each other's experience and commiserating on the power of the move. Therefore, they not only comment on the idols' movements or their own, but also the other person's. This can also be seen in the previous example with SHINee's "Everybody," as Jasmine's exclamation of "the best scream," curates Cortney's movement. This does not only happen when something sexual in nature occurs; reactors will dance to the music and/or imitate the idols movements in the videos, sometimes not even speaking as their reaction becomes a series of movements, a back and forth with the video. While this does indicate that K-pop has a way of getting inside a person, it also displays a quick analysis of movement on the part of the reactor; not only for the movement in the video (and their ability to mimic it), but also for the movement *their* body produces and the other bodies around them, forming a moving conversation, more akin to an improvised performance.

What Cortney and Jasmine's reactions reveal is the way fangirl performances are learned, transmitted, and curated by other fans. It is important to note that fangirl performances are not constituted by universally uniform reactions; in other words, not everyone, everywhere reacts in the exact same ways to the same videos. Even when reacting together, fans like Cortney and Jasmine will acknowledge how they react differently.<sup>8</sup> However, I argue that fangirling consists of shared practices, even if they are not uniform or identical across each body. As fandom scholars such as Bethan Jones (2016) and Lisa A. Lewis (1992) have noted, "fangirling" itself is a learned, performative act that has a history within boyband culture and other media fandoms. Jones emphasizes how media portrayals of fangirls disassociate their behaviors from the context of fandom and their "specific set of fannish practices" (2016, 56), indicating that these practices are specific to fangirls (and in her case, One Direction boyband fandom). Certain practices are re-performed and transferred from fan to fan – such as an embodied scream – and they become a reservoir of behaviors for fans to utilize and signal their allegiance to a fandom. They also become behaviors by which to define a fandom. What would Beatlemania be without the images of female fans screaming, crying, and committing what some may see as ethically suspect acts, like trying to sneak into airport customs through the baggage conveyor belt? Specific reactions are repeated throughout fandoms and become a defining factor of those fandoms.

Therefore, when Cortney, Jasmine, or JRE fan out, they are performing not only their behaviors, but also learned behaviors from K-pop fandom and wider pop idol fandom history. Fans recognize this instructional side of fangirling as well, as one fan (critically) said in a YouTube comment to a reaction video: "I know how to fangirl all on my own without another video to help me!" (CrystalNeko 2016).<sup>9</sup> Though this commenter rejects reaction videos, they show an awareness that fangirling is a specific practice that one knows *how* to do, rather than an unspecific, "organic" reaction. And though this commenter does not need "help," K-pop fan

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<sup>8</sup> For example, when Cortney and Jasmine reacted to Lee Michelle's "Without You" (2015), which is a song about the prejudice the singer faces as a biracial, Black Korean woman, Cortney broke down crying almost immediately because she is a biracial Black American woman. Jasmine was also visibly touched as a Black American, but she noted she does not share the same life experience as Cortney. Though this was Lee Michelle's debut song, and therefore neither Cortney nor Jasmine could be "fans" of singer, they brought their varied experiences as Black women and K-pop fandom knowledge to the video.

<sup>9</sup> This is a comment on TerryTV's YouTube video, "Problematic Kpop Channels" (2018), which will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

reaction videos circulate fannish behaviors, teaching transnational fans how to appreciate K-pop; not only that it is something worthy of appreciation, but the different ways in which it can be appreciated.<sup>10</sup> Reactors point out key moments, such as the “dopeness” of an anthem or the electrifying power of abs, and they do this through a combination of speech, sound, and bodily movement. Though difficult to pin down any specific movements that happen in all reaction videos, they range from screams, exclamations, garbled sounds, colloquial movements, dance movements, laughs, tears, mimicry, and flails, to smiles, subtle intakes of breath, widened eyes, and silent, yet slackened, jaws. And while previous studies have singled out certain behaviors for K-pop fans (such as the mixing of Korean and English language) or reactors in general (such the “scream” and its gendered history), they can never encompass the dimensionality of full body analysis. It is particularly those moments that avoid complete sentences or words *at all* that point to the ephemeral, affective nodes within K-pop. When Jasmine shoots her hands out, when Cortney screams, or when JRE pumps his arms, they embody, teach, curate, and pass on affective moments in K-pop and show how to continue the performance for other transnational fans.

Beyond just one video or one reactor’s channel, these reactions jump and spread from fan to fan, constituting what Sara Ahmed (2004) terms an affective economy. Here, “economy” refers not to the circulation of money, but rather to the circulation of emotions. In an affective economy, emotions work to align individuals with collectives, and their refusal to be contained in individual bodies allows for the creation of collective bodies (128).<sup>11</sup> While K-pop fan reaction videos are technically economic in the financial sense, because they can be monetized and tied to the promotion of K-pop, they also form an affective economy because they circulate a shared affect that ties parts of transnational fandom together through re-performing reactions. This is also apparent in the continual spread of K-pop fan reaction videos by other reactors and channels, which shows how K-pop reaction videos have a contagion-like effect. That is not to say that full body analysis is not present in other scenarios, but rather that reaction videos stage and magnify this relation, the almost simultaneous nature of object action/fan reaction, showing how fandom forms in the moment of encounter. To follow Ahmed, the videos suggest that “emotions are not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’ but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds” (2004, 117). They do not just convey “fan feelings,” but rather perform the process of being a fan, unfolding into fandom and show how fannish bodies are not uncontrolled, but rather participate in a collective choreography with the object and other fans, ultimately creating a performance of fandom that extends beyond one individual.

Though I should note that reaction videos (and fannish affect) do not circulate one particular emotion, such as enjoyment. Fandom activities are often classed as “celebrations” or performances of pleasure.<sup>12</sup> However, the performance of fannish affect is not about only or

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<sup>10</sup> There is another subset of fan reaction video that I call “special interest” fan reactions, where the reactors claim some sort of professional expertise (such as a musician or producer) and offer specialized commentary in their reactions relating to those areas. However, reactors who just “react” without a specialty area still teach other fans how to act and appreciate K-pop, by offering a point of entry to newer fans and a site for continued affective performance for current fans.

<sup>11</sup> For example, “hate” circulates through certain “signs,” such as terrorists, asylum seekers (which end up synonymous with “bogus” asylum seekers), etc., without being about a specific person. It is precisely because hate cannot be reduced to a particular body that it continues to circulate.

<sup>12</sup> That is not to say that pleasure is always associated with the happy, and fandom scholars have studied other affective phenomena associated with fandom, such as fanwars/flamewars, anti-fandom, trolling, and toxicity,

always manifesting a positive or negative emotion. There is always a chance a fan will react neutrally or negatively to a video, but there is also the possibility that they will not know how to react. For an example, Cortney and Jasmine reacted very differently to SHINee’s “Good Evening” than they did to other SHINee songs. This is because it was the first single SHINee released since member Jonghyun died by suicide. Jasmine says in the intro, “I don’t know how to feel right now,” and their reactions throughout most of the video are small comments, and half-concerned, half-smiling facial expressions. It is clear that there are parts of the video they enjoy, but as Cortney says, “I wish I could describe the way my body feels right now; *I’m all over the place*,” which ends up physically manifesting itself in a sort of tense holding; her body is unusually still, but emanates a tightness and ambivalence, unsure how to react to something that is at-once celebratory (a landmark single from her favorite group) and grief-inducing (seeing their favorite group as four members instead of five). Cortney and Jasmine embody SHINee fans in this moment, giving them the space to dialogue with collective fandom over what is a conflicted, complicated time. It is here that the fan is not characterized by uncontrollable screaming, pleasurable feelings, or even hatred, but rather the repeated, embodied conversation that happens with the object and wider networks of transnational fandom.

### **Liveness and the Interface in Full Body Analysis**

Up until now I have focused on the reactors’ bodies with little attention to the technologies of video production and distribution that they utilize. However, rather than separating the fans’ reaction from the production process, I would like to look at the ways that K-pop fan reactions videos as challenge traditional notions of liveness and harness the interface as part of full body analysis, to show how fannish reactions continue to spread and become enfolded in the K-pop object itself.

Liveness may seem like an obvious trait of reaction videos, as the reactors are reacting in “real time” in that they record their first-time reactions and say whatever comes to their minds, supposedly unfiltered. As this is seen as the primary draw to reaction videos, we could say that liveness or “in-the-moment” content becomes the most valued trait of reaction videos; doubly so when reactors strive to upload right away, often within 24 hours of a video’s release. As noted, fans will often react in pairs or groups, highlighting the live, co-present element of reaction videos. Further, though the wider K-pop fandom is not present in the same room as reactors, their conversation in the video comments shows them performing together in digital space. However, reaction videos complicate and extend liveness across time and space in other ways, so that the “immediate” reaction of the reactor is not the only live performance valued. As reaction videos have grown as a genre, another category of “react to react” videos have formed, in which people record themselves reacting to reaction videos. This extends the time of the “live” reaction across time and space; a specific reaction now has the potential to continue on in others’ bodies, while still retaining a real-time quality.

“React to react” is one way that K-pop idols can participate in transnational K-pop fandom as sometimes K-pop idols themselves will record themselves reacting to reaction videos, though the contexts vary; sometimes they are highly produced (in the context of a TV show) and sometimes they are in more casual settings, like reaction videos themselves. A striking example of this is when K-pop idol group K.A.R.D reacted to one of JRE’s reaction videos through the V

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which indicates that fandom can contain the opposite of “good feelings,” yet still derive a certain pleasure out of fannish activity (Click 2019).

APP streaming service in 2016, which led to several more instances of K.A.R.D. and JRE reacting to each other.<sup>13</sup> After K.A.R.D.'s "react to react," JRE made a video reacting to their reactions, entitled "K.A.R.D WATCHED ME! O\_O" (2016).<sup>14</sup> JRE talks directly to K.A.R.D, emphasizing the conversational aspect of reaction videos and expressing surprise and delight when K.A.R.D members mimic *his* movements, showing how the bodily reaction and copied movements are valued as a form of flattery; it is as if K.A.R.D is having a fannish reaction to *him*. JRE ends his video by acknowledging that reactions "aren't the greatest thing in the world" and that "it's kind of weird to see people react to *you*," but that as long as they (K.A.R.D and wider fandom) "get the same vibe I get, it's a beautiful thing." For JRE, reactions are a shared experience with K.A.R.D, a moment of coming together. Though they are not present in the same time and space, "real time" expression is paramount, the ways we can see the chain reaction of JRE to K.A.R.D, then back to JRE; a full body analysis and conversation across time, yet stitched together to show the near-simultaneity of reactions.

On May 9, 2017, JRE uploaded a video called "CHILLIN' WITH K.A.R.D!" where he got to go and interview K.A.R.D as part of their international tour promotions. JRE interviews K.A.R.D in the usual fashion, asking questions that both he and fans have. However, toward the end of the interview they all stand up and proceed to try and do "their best body roll." One of JRE's most repeated and recognizable dance moves is his body roll, so much so that has become an in-joke with his fans; he has done videos of him only body rolling, he has done body roll tutorials, he tags reaction videos with whether he body rolls or not. Therefore, in this interview, instead of the K-pop idol teaching the fan and/or interviewer one of their dance moves (a common practice in Korean variety shows), the fan teaches the K-pop idol one of *their* moves. If it was not clear from the above "react to react," it is clear here that idols' reactions to fans become a way to uplift fans, giving them visibility for the work they do, and to connect with fans through learning fannish practices. The visibility of JRE's fandom performance and his mobility as a transnational fan-celebrity show that the performance of transnational K-pop fandom is an entertainment to be both learned and enjoyed, especially by the K-pop idols themselves. But more so, perhaps, reactions are a repeated event where idol, fan, and fandom can meet (digitally or in-person) and respond to each other, taking on each other's movements, sharing in this fannish practice.

Though the interview was an actual "live" event in that JRE and K.A.R.D were co-present in the same time and space, their interview was recorded, and it would be a mistake to ignore the role that the interface plays in collective fandom reactions.<sup>15</sup> Within K-pop fan reaction videos the interface does not signify a transparent, impartial observer, but rather a practice that K-pop fans embrace and one that is part of their reactions and collective choreography. The use of interface is perhaps most obvious when JRE uses light editing on his

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<sup>13</sup> V APP is an application that focuses on the "personal broadcasting" of idols. Many idols use this platform to promote through both musical performances (streamed concerts, etc.) and clips of themselves in daily life. According to Miranda Ruth Larsen, this "in-the-moment" feeling and format echoes video chat platforms like Facetime, which intensifies a feeling of intimacy and ability to reach out to the idols beyond their official social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) (2016). Perhaps, then, it is appropriate that K.A.R.D would meld this feeling of intimacy with that of a reaction video

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that this video is not a "true" reaction video in that it is not JRE's first time watching it; rather he is recording himself to share his excitement with fans, "break it down" (the video), and give a response to K.A.R.D.

<sup>15</sup> If I am permitted one bad joke to emphasize the importance of recording, if a fan reacts and no one is there to watch it, does fandom still form?

reaction videos or creates separate, intense reaction “skits.” For example, in his video, “LISA SLAYED ME [BLACKPINK – KILL THIS LOVE]” (2019), JRE isolates a 15-second clip from Blackpink’s “Kill This Love” music video, where member Lisa kicks in door. JRE emphasizes how intense his reaction is to Lisa kicking in the door, by first cutting back and forth between the scene and increasing close-ups of his shocked face, and then by green-screening himself in the scene, standing in front of the door and falling over when Lisa kicks it in. JRE’s superimposing of himself both embodies intense fan reaction to an affective moment and the prominence of transnational fan performance in K-pop, as he places himself literally in the same scene and stage as Blackpink.

In another example, when K.A.R.D released their single “Bomb Bomb” (2019) they confidently declared that if the video reached five million views within 24 hours, JRE would body roll in his “birthday suit,” playfully including transnational fandom performance with their video release. When JRE uploaded his reaction to the song, he did not body roll in his birthday suit, but he did include moments of superimposing K.A.R.D’s music video over his reactions, so both images took up the full screen, breaking the reactor format of always keeping the MV screen small and discrete in a particular position. Both now-transparent images entangle and disentangle, confusing what is a reaction to what; the overlapping screens close the gap between instigator and reactor even further, making liveness, simultaneity, collective reactions, and interface more apparent.

Though JRE’s examples are the most obvious of a fan using digital technology to enhance their reactions, I argue that the formalization of fan reactions through a repertoire that *includes* recording, uploading, and interacting with interface shows how the distribution of reaction videos not only circulates or makes transnational fandom more visible, but also is part of fandom’s full body analysis, making transnational K-pop fandom inextricable from both embodied performance and digital networks. While reaction videos have an “end” where the reactor gives their last thoughts (often an emotional, stream-of-consciousness style review), fan reaction videos do not *end* because other fans will continue the conversation and more reactors will repeat performances with every upload. And as reactions spread from reactor to reactor, videos sprawling like their own transnational fan network online, so too do the watchers react.

### **“Bad” Examples: Sincerity and Race in K-pop Reaction Videos**

When JRE and Cortney and Jasmine began posting reactions to K-pop in 2012, the number of K-pop reactors was lower, and K-pop was still seen as a niche corner of YouTube. However, as K-pop itself and these videos grow and gain attention, so too does the skepticism toward certain performances within the transnational K-pop fan community. Popular reactors may have their own fans, but the more they upload and monetize their videos, the more their fannishness is called into question by other fans. A 2017 article from *Seoulbeats* (a Korean entertainment website run by fans) outlines this core tension. On one hand, writer Hannah recognizes that reaction videos build community by allowing audiences to share relatable reactions. On the other hand, Hannah expresses a concern that many fans share regarding reaction videos and sincerity: “But are these YouTubers creating reaction videos simply to engage with other fans or are they riding the hype to further their own fame?” (2017). While many fans accept that YouTubers will try to make money off their videos, this article demonstrates a feeling that if the performance of fandom is not sincere enough, somehow this is

a scam on true fans; gaining views and money from fans when one does not share the same passion.

This section will focus on how certain K-pop fan reactions are policed, controlled, and valued depending on which body is doing the reacting. Fans who critique and evaluate the sincerity of fan reactions question the core premise of reaction videos as genuine reactions. Yeran Kim names “ordinariness,” “immersion,” and “naturalness” as key aesthetics of reaction videos that draws viewers in; that is, the sense of reactors bringing watchers into their private, intimate space and giving frank reactions (2015, 337). In the staging of intimacy, the reactor is assumed to give an unmediated response and therefore, a pledge of fannishness. However, as K-pop fan reaction videos increase in popularity and number, the more scrutinized the reactors are in terms of their *fandom* performance, even if the reactors follow generic conventions. K-pop fan reaction videos, then, work to show how issues within transnational fandom and what is considered acceptable fandom behavior are thought in-tandem with the reactors’ bodily performance, and how these judgments are interlinked to issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

If K-pop fan reaction videos are direct successors of fangirling as a practice, then what fangirls also reveal is how reactions (and therefore reaction videos) are always already marked by gender and race. The way a reaction is framed and valued depends on *which* body is doing the reacting. As scholars have noted, much of the framing of fangirls relates to the ways women and girls have been pathologized as hysterical, emotional, and not in control of their minds or bodies throughout history. Tellingly, Freud used fangirls as a prime example of “group spirit,” when explaining the primary role that envy plays in group formation:

We only have to think of the troop of women and girls, all of them in love in an enthusiastically sentimental way, who crowd around a singer or pianist after his performance. It would be certainly be easy for each of them to be jealous of the rest; but in the face of their numbers and the consequent impossibility of their reaching the aim of their love, they renounce it, and, instead of pulling out one another’s hair, they act as a united group, do homage to the hero of the occasion with their common actions, and would probably be glad to have a share of *his* flowing locks. Originally rivals, they have succeeded in identifying themselves with one another by means of a similar love for the same object. (Quoted in Ngai, 2007, 165)

Sianne Ngai deftly takes this quote to show how Freud ties *envy* to women and femininity, as if the only or best example he can use for this process is a “female throng or multitude” (2007, 165). While Ngai’s point is the crucial role envy plays in women’s group formation, I am interested in how Freud chooses to use fangirls – not necessarily by name, but by description – as exemplary of group formation, identified through their “common actions” (assumedly fanning out). For Freud, like many fan scholars, recognition of mutual love – and not just a little love but a *lot* of love – and the acting out of this love forms the fandom. However, with Freud there is an implicit assumption of violence as well associated with fangirls; the assumption that if not for mutual love they would pull “one another’s hair” and that now that violence is directed to the singer, as they “crowd around” him, and as if ripping his hair out and sharing it amongst themselves is still a possibility. Freud’s is not an insider’s view of fandom, but rather the germination of gendering fannish behavior and marking overt bodily displays of fannish passion as feminine, excessive, and potentially dangerous.

Fangirls become defined by their excess, uncontrollable emotion, and potential danger, but because they are young girls (by the traditional definition), their emotions are also dismissed and trivialized to control their supposedly inappropriate reactions. Jones (2016, 54) discusses how fangirl behavior is policed by outside media, through articles or documentaries that paint them as delusional and unstable, and also from *inside* fandom, by fans do not want to be associated with fangirls, claiming they are not “true” fans due to their outrageous, embarrassing behavior that bleeds into non-fan, public spaces. Much like “respond, don’t react,” fangirls’ reactions are unseemly, and it is through this policing of their behavior that fangirls become what Ngai calls “bad examples,” or rather, an example that is *not* exemplary. If a “good example” fulfills a set of predetermined behaviors of positive group formation, then a “bad example” “destabilizes the argument it is supposed to bolster” (2007, 165). The “bad” example of fandom, the fangirl, is at once something we attempt to control, through what is labeled acceptable and unacceptable behavior. K-pop fan reactors also function as examples through their performance of excess, because to be exemplary is to contain *so much* of one affect that one becomes either good or bad; either they are very clearly a fan, or they are *too much* of one thing (they upload *too many* videos to be sincere or perform *too much* like a fangirl to be a real reaction). If the reactor is a “good” example, they will circulate unquestioned, but if they are labeled a “bad” example, their value within fandom will be debated.

To talk about in-fandom issues with fandom performance in K-pop reaction videos, I will primarily use a video from TerryTV, “Problematic Kpop Channels” (2018; as of this writing this video has been removed from the TerryTV channel, though many of the responses from other YouTubers remain), and its subsequent comments, where YouTuber Terry calls out several K-pop reaction channels as “problematic.” I should note this is not to target TerryTV specifically, but because his video culls together many debates surrounding K-pop reaction videos that happen in disparate forums on the internet. Additionally, Terry is a popular YouTuber (one million subscribers) who produces content related to South Korea and is a frequent KCON guest with his own fandom.<sup>16</sup> The comments for this video and his follow-up video “My Response” reflect both support for and dissent from Terry’s views, which shows how contested these topics are within transnational K-pop fandom. While Terry calls out many YouTubers in his video, most of his criticisms revolve around the reactors being insincere in some fashion.<sup>17</sup> I will mainly focus on discussions of race, sincerity, and racism within fan reactions, though gender and sexuality are evaluated as well. (For example, while Terry “calls out” reactors for being insincere in different ways, most of the reactors he calls out are male, indicating that male performance can be a particularly contentious site within reactions as it relates to the more feminine practices of fangirling.)

Many previous studies of K-pop fan reaction videos focus more on national difference than race, with the exception being David C. Oh’s two studies Black K-pop fan reactors (2017a) and White fan reactors (2017b). Oh points out that transnational K-pop fans are cognizant of racial difference, as many of them are somewhat stigmatized for liking K-pop, a product that is racially and ethnically different from themselves (2017b, 2277; See also Otmazgin & Lyan

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<sup>16</sup> I should note that not all of Terry’s content is K-pop related; many of his videos are about his personal life as well. However, he got his start producing a popular “Koreans React” series to K-pop videos.

<sup>17</sup> The video does also call out fan accounts that plagiarize work from other fans, but this is unrelated to the performance of “sincerity” within reaction videos.

2013).<sup>18</sup> Being stigmatized in some way for their K-pop fandom is a reason that many turned to YouTube in the first place. However, Oh notes that for White fans who occupy a space of dominant (White) racial logics, there is a hesitation to connect this stigma to anti-Asian sentiment or White supremacy. Through their reluctance to talk about race they reify the idea of colorblindness in fandom and limit their hybrid, textual production as fans. Here, Oh hits on an important factor within race and fandom, which is the expectation of colorblindness, because of the somewhat naïve logic that everyone is a fan, while simultaneously ignoring uneven power structures within media consumption (see also Pande 2018).

For Black fans, Oh's analysis is more optimistic. While he outlines a common narrative of Black and Korean relations being unreconcilable in the United States, widely represented in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, he sees Black K-pop fans and their reaction videos as a challenge to this narrative of conflict (2017a, 269). Oh argues that the Black reactors in his study celebrate intercultural, cosmopolitan connections with other fans and idols, which de-centers Whiteness and challenges racial hierarchies of desire. These fans view K-pop not through the lens of anti-Blackness or appropriation (which is a common argument as many K-pop groups are influenced by hip-hop music), but rather through a respect and knowledge of the source material, which allows fans to perform a polycultural identity (2017a, 279). However, it is clear from discussions by Cortney, Jasmine, and other Black reactors that not every reactor shares the same optimism toward K-pop's appropriation of Black American culture, or at least that it is a contentious topic within transnational K-pop fandom. Issues of race are usually fraught within fandoms of transnational properties, by virtue of the property circulating through various cultures with different ways of discussing race. Blogs such as *Black K-pop Fans* and *Seoulbeats* regularly discuss racial topics, particularly anti-Black sentiment both within the K-pop industry and within K-pop fandom, while simultaneously posting more "typical" celebratory posts. Topics that are commonly referred to are the use of the "n-word" in K-pop, Black and brown face in Korean entertainment, and cultural appropriation from Black American culture and other cultures. They and many other fans argue that because K-pop is a hybrid music-genre and transnational product that takes much inspiration from American hip-hop and R&B, it involves itself in racial conversations, even without fans bringing the subject up.

Beauty YouTuber and frequent KCON guest Miles Jai of MilesJaiProductions has talked about this in several videos. First, Jai filmed as a fan by cataloguing their reactions in "Sh\*t Black K-pop Fans Say" (2016). This video posits several reactions a Black K-pop fan could have to K-pop, ranging from more expected fannish behavior (delight, sharing, and dancing), to educating ("no, they're saying NAE-GA, it's part of the Korean language"), to dealing with stereotypical assumptions from non-fans ("No, mom, I don't want to be Korean"), to confronting anti-Blackness ("oh that wasn't naega that time"), and expressing complicated feelings (flat out crying over problematic elements). Though the video is not a "traditional" reaction video, Jai's humorous skit cuts together fannish reactions of Black fans, showing how full body analysis involves race as *part* of transnational K-pop fandom. Jai's video demonstrates much of the polycultural performance that Oh elucidates in his article, but the difference is that Miles (and many K-pop fans like them) still hold within their reactions complex, conflicting feelings toward K-pop and fandom, rather than a peaceful coexistence of identities.

Sometimes anti-Blackness within K-pop and fandom is enough to drive fans of color away. In another video, "5 STAGES OF BEING A K-POP FAN: WHERE IM AT NOW"

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<sup>18</sup> I should note that this perception changes in the context of fans of Korean descent and other Asian ethnicities, though still informed by uneven power structures, which will be taken up in chapter two.

(2018), Jai once again catalogues their reactions in five emotional stages, ranging from “discovery” to “skepticism” (of the problematic elements and practices within the K-pop industry), eventually ending with the stage “distance and/or disinterest.” However, rather than performing “disinterest” – assumedly a neutral-if-not-a-little-cold affect – Jai’s reaction to K-pop is one of mounting horror, as everywhere they look someone, or something, mentions K-pop mega-group BTS. In a last-ditch effort, Jai turns on the TV to watch *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, only to have Will Smith ask another character, “Hey man, have you all heard of BTS?” The skit ends with Jai running out of the room from the encroaching influence of K-pop. Here K-pop is not a transcultural dream, but rather the anti-Blackness within the industry and fandom has driven Jai away, as at the end they say that they “have their hands full” – and Jai gestures several times holding their hands up, fingers splayed as if carrying a great weight – with the racial problems in the U.S. and do not have the energy to engage with racism in South Korea, showing the material effects that racism has on a body and the limits of transnational fan space.

Whether or not reactors of color think K-pop is appropriate, it is clear that the Black reactors Oh cites do not want their *fandom* called into question and wish to perform it, unquestioned. Oh notes how Black reactors are questioned because of the assumption of appropriation and anti-Blackness within K-pop, which in turn stigmatizes Black fans, with non-fans in their communities accusing them of being anti-Black (2017a, 278). However, it is not only non-fans who judge K-pop fans reactions, but also K-pop fans, and in Jai’s videos they call out K-pop *fandom* in particular for expressing anti-Black sentiments, as fans often defend idols’ actions, and, as Jai indicates, mimic them to problematic extents. This draws attention to fandom itself, and how fandom polices its own fans’ reactions based on race and shows how performances of excess, or animatedness, are always already tied to race. In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai (2007) argues that if one considers many racial stereotypes, such as the “Angry Black woman,” the “fiery Latina,” etc., people of color are often figured as being *too animated*, or in excess of their affect. (Ngai also notes that Asians and Asian Americans are often figured in a *lack of* affect, as if they were robotic; this is still tying race to animatedness, even though Asians are figured as having *too little*, a sort of negative excess.) For fans, one might assume that this excess is *expected*, much like with fangirls, which is where problematic of assumptions of colorblindness in fandom come in. However, Barbara Ehrenreich et al.’s study of Beatles fangirl fandom noted that race was inherently tied to the ways reactions were framed; reporters in 1964 likened fangirls’ reactions to “aboriginal instincts,” “dancing witch doctors,” or “stamping natives” (1992, 89), showing that reactions, race, and fandom (and fangirls) have always been tied.

I now want to turn to a specific example from Terry’s video that shows how K-pop fans of color, and in this instance a Black K-pop fan, and their reactions become sites of contention, to argue over what is a scam and what is a vision of inclusivity. Terry criticizes reactor BRIS (an acronym for “Best Revenge Is Success” of channel BRISXLIFE for putting “BLACK GUY REACTS” in the titles of some of his videos, calling it “race baiting.” Though this is not the definition of race baiting,<sup>19</sup> Terry uses the term to say that BRIS’ reactions are not “different enough” from standard fan reactions to warrant the label “BLACK GUY REACTS.” Terry says:

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<sup>19</sup> According to the OED, race baiting is “The incitement or exploitation of racial hatred, prejudice, or tension, usually (esp. in later use) for political gain.” However, it has been noted that contemporarily the term has taken a strange turn, deployed to stop conversations on race by claiming that any mention of race is “race baiting” (See White 2018; Meyerson 2015).

[The watching audience is] gonna think that ‘Black Guy Reacts to BTS,’ they’re gonna think that it’s some kind of juxtaposed reaction, that it’s somebody who has never listened to K-pop or is not used to K-pop or who doesn’t even know who BTS is; they’re gonna think someone like *that* reacting to BTS, not a very nice, educated, well-mannered individual who just fanboys the whole time.

There are several things to unpack here, including Terry’s problematic, stereotypical assumptions that “Black guy reacts” would create a different image than that of a fanboy who is nice, well-mannered and educated.<sup>20</sup> He also emphasizes the assumption of colorblindness in fandom, saying: “His [BRIS’] reaction is basically the same as *anybody else* who would make the same video,” and therefore somehow the “Black guy” label is wrong, despite the fact that BRIS is Black. What Terry and subsequent comments of support reveal is that BRIS’ performance of race does not match with how they think a Black K-pop fan should act; or rather, his declaration of himself as a Black man from Compton should do *more work* than merely perform fandom, which is seemingly colorblind. It should do the work of being a first-time watcher, or of being someone who brings a particularly “hip-hop attitude” to the video (demonstrated by Terry’s edit of a picture of hip-hop group N.W.A. when he says the word “juxtaposition”), or of someone who addresses anti-Blackness in K-pop, like other Black fans have done. As BRIS’ videos are mostly celebratory and positive, his performance of Blackness fails in their eyes for not fulfilling a predetermined role; his own identifying as Black in his titles becomes an insincere scam. It is almost as if, for critics, though he is expressing fannish passion that is very animated, he is not animated *enough* in his Blackness to warrant using “Black guy reacts.”

Terry also criticizes BRIS for crowd-funding his ticket to the American Music Awards (AMAs), where BTS performed, bringing to the fore a link between reactions and money. This also drew criticism from other K-pop fans across social media as well, but despite criticism, BRIS received approximately \$1,070 for the ticket. Terry criticizes the fact that BRIS did not seem to have a prime seat given the amount of money he received. Of course, getting a prime seat at a concert is not only about how much money one is willing to spend; it is also about logging onto the ticketing website right as they open and hoping you get in fast enough to randomly draw the coveted seats close to the stage. However, Terry sees BRIS’ crowd-funding campaign as scam, because he was unable to provide his viewers with proof of their dollars at work. He did not get a front-row seat, he did not get close-up shots of BTS, but rather had what appears to be a *typical* fan experience at a concert and certainly not worth \$1,000.

However, it is precisely typical, vicarious experiences like these that Hannah of *Seoulbeats* points out as valuable in reaction videos. Writing about JRE, Hannah says, “By sharing his reactions of these encounters [with K-pop idols] via vlogs, JREKML is creating content that encourages fans to not only share in his experiences but live vicariously through his channel” (2017). Other commenters to Terry’s video defended BRIS’ action, pointing out that people can spend their money in any way they desire. “So what if he didn’t get the best seats and the camera angles are not perfect?? It makes us feel like we were at the concert and not staring [at the] TV at home” (shahiteeka shrestha, 2018). Here, the sharing of a typical fan experience through his bodily performance (from filming himself driving to the concert to leaving at the

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<sup>20</sup> In a follow-up response video, Terry admitted that he phrased this poorly. However, he tried to explain it by saying that he edited out a bit about BRIS being from Compton, and that BRIS’ reactions do not fit the stereotypical images of people from Compton, which still makes the same problematic arguments from his first video.

end) is the value and worth paying BRIS for, especially if his fans like his content. While some criticized BRIS for being a newer fan at the time (and therefore less deserving of the money than a long-time fan), others enjoy spectating the process of *becoming* fan. On his AMAs vlog, one commenter said, “to see someone learn about this genre [K-pop] and presence and become so involved they’d follow an artist and then be able to see them live. That’s so incredible and I’m so happy for you! It’s been so fun to see the whole process happen in basically real time” (Elizabeth Hanlon, “I Saw BTS At the AMA’s !!!,” BRISXLIFE, 2017). For this commenter and many others on BRIS’ channel, their enjoyment comes from seeing the process of him becoming a fan and performing fandom in his vlogs. Whether a new fan or long-term fan, the performance of fandom and documenting *becoming fan* is a valuable practice. The problem comes in when the reactor is judged to be “using K-pop for money,” and especially when it is tied to a body that is already suspect for their performance of fandom because of their race.

Living vicariously through reactors, however, is intimately tied to their performance of both fandom and race, and what their reactions come to embody for their fans. BRIS has replied to Terry’s criticisms through a video of his own (“My Response: Problematic Kpop Channels,” 2018). BRIS reads a comment from a fan to frame his response, where the fan emphasizes their desire to find other Black K-pop fans, and that BRIS labeling his videos “Black Guy Reacts” helps them find other Black fans. Like many K-pop reactors, BRIS uploads his videos to connect to fandom, and in a fandom where anti-Black sentiments exist, his reiteration of himself as a Black fan reaffirms and uplifts Black fandom. In addition, in BRIS’ AMAs vlog, his girlfriend makes a comment on how there are all sorts of fans supporting BTS, not just teenage girls (the assumed fangirl audience). The comments for this vlog are filled with other fans’ assertions that they are of a variety of ages and races. Now, while for many this demonstrates the power and appeal of BTS (and perhaps K-pop as a whole), one commenter also says of BRIS that he is “living proof that you don’t have to be a teenage girl to love BTS” (Nina 2017). BRIS acknowledges in another video that he is a 6’5” Black man from Compton and that he does not look like the stereotypical K-pop fan, and therefore him performing in a fannish manner makes people question his sincerity (“I NEED YOUR HELP GOING TO THE BBMA’s TO SEE BTS! | (CLICKBAIT \ TROLLING) LOL,” 2018). Though BRIS’ performance of fandom is seen as a scam to some due to his race, his race and bodily performances *as* a fan also become “living proof,” a way of finding community for both Black K-pop fans and those who do not consider themselves the stereotypical K-pop fan.

What transnational fandom criticisms about K-pop reaction videos show is that the popularity of reaction videos and the performance of fandom, though a phenomenon and an entertainment, is not created equal among all fans. BRIS and Cameron may be contested fan reactors (“bad” examples by some people’s standards), but through performances that agitate, they destabilize what is considered a “good” performance of fandom, causing the fandom to constantly re-evaluate its boundaries. I would also note that this agitation is not through acting differently than a “typical fan/girl”, but rather through claiming the performance of fangirl passion for themselves, and in way *over*-performing it (reading erotic fan fiction out loud or becoming so obsessed as to rely on fan support to go to a concert). While some fans film and share reactions in the spirit of optimistic transculturalism, others do so to highlight racial issues present within K-pop fandom. Race circulates as part of transnational fan reactions, not *despite* of it, and the embodied performances of certain fans and their “typical” reactions become events of resistance and re-definition, showing the potential of reactions to de-stabilize pre-determined structures of fandom.

## Conclusion: K-pop Fan Reactors as Transnational Celebrity

Not all reactors are considered “bad examples” of fandom and their fannish performances are held up and commoditized by the K-pop industry, with JRE being the primary example. Not every fan watches JRE, but rarely is his fandom questioned even though he also makes money from his YouTube videos, has merchandise, and has done media work in the K-pop industry. Instead of criticism that he is too commercial (and therefore insincere or disconnected from fandom), JRE and his reactions have become *exemplary* of transnational K-pop fandom, and his success is connected to his successful fannish reactions, with his body circulating as an affective node of fannish performance. While I follow Ahmed’s thinking that affects do not positively reside in one body, and therefore fannish affect and reactions cannot be located in *one fan only*, reactors also illustrate the other part of her argument, that feelings can “stick” to particular bodies (2004, 127). Looking at the rise of JRE as a fan-celebrity and how this formed with the rise of transnational K-pop fandom in the United States shows how JRE’s bodily performance and circulation becomes mobilized as a form of currency that adds not only commercial value to the K-pop industry and Hallyu Wave, but also enhances the importance of K-pop fandom, as a co-creator in the K-pop industry.

While JRE has created fan content from 2012, I would argue his exemplariness as a transnational K-pop fan formed in conjunction with the shaping of transnational K-pop fandom as a whole in the United States due to his close connection with KCON, a convention for K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean entertainment. KCON is a large-scale, international convention that has been held in multiple locales throughout the world, including Tokyo, Dubai, and Mexico City. However, KCON got its start in Los Angeles and is consistently held in the United States every year. It is organized by Korean entertainment company CJ E&M and began as a way to bring “All Things Hallyu” to an American fanbase (though they have since branched out into other countries). Therefore, from the beginning it was a distinctly transnational convention, bringing Hallyu stars and entertainment professionals to meet with overseas fans. Their biggest event is undoubtedly the two-day K-pop concert, complete with fan meetings during the convention. KCON also hosts panels and workshops on popular Hallyu-related topics, such as dance workshops, Korean cosmetics, and working in the industry. It also has a distinctly commercial element, with their convention floor containing representatives from companies that are not directly involved in K-pop or K-dramas, such as Korean food chains, makeup companies, technology, and even companies like State Farm Insurance and Verizon, showing how K-pop is a space of capital flows where fans are not only the consumers, but also the conduits. This intertwining of global consumer capitalism with Hallyu fans has drawn considerable critique within Hallyu scholarship, as it emphasizes an identity based on consumerism, and in the case of Asian capitalism, what Youna Kim calls “pop Asianism” or a shared identity of “virtual Asianness” based on capitalist consumption (Kim 2008, 14; See also Ubonrat and Shin 2007).

JRE came to represent transnational fandom in this convention space. In a video where he tells fans his KCON schedule for KCON NY 2018 (“THAT THROWBACK CLIP! [KCON NY 2018]”), he claims that KCON has seen him “grow up” since he has been attending since 2013. In fact, as JRE reminds us, his first introduction to KCON was through an MNET reality series called *#mykpop*, which looked for eight “passionate KPOP FANS” from anywhere in North America to document their time at KCON 2013, the second year in the convention’s existence (Soompi 2013). Though JRE expresses embarrassment at the old show – “don’t you dare search

it up,” he says, while simultaneously showing clips from it – it is a reminder that JRE came to KCON as not only a fan, but as a *superfan*; he had to prove he was the most “UNIQUE & ENTHUSIASTIC KPOP FAN EVER” for the show, after all. In one way, he represented something “unique” among K-pop fans (the *most passionate* fan), but he also represented an affective gathering of K-pop fandom, as if the eight “most unique and enthusiastic” fans could embody the entire Hallyu Wave in the United States. Though the show has a linear narrative (from the contestants arriving at the airport through their KCON experience), I view it as a collection of fan reactions, as its purpose was to document these fans’ experiences and reactions to KCON, to the idols, and to each other. In another telling moment, the beginning of a *#mykpop* promotional video shows clips of numerous anonymous fans, adding more and more until they accumulate and eventually form an entire background for the video (“*#mykpop* Series Promo,” 2013). Perhaps what is more notable is the background sound: what appears to be an uncountable number of fans screaming. From this screaming and numerous fan clips, the video fades into a shot of the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena and clips of the eight *#mykpop* participants, alluding to how they were born out of and formed from not only fandom, but also fan reaction – the scream.

Here, we see the other side of Ahmed’s affective economies at work, which is that affects and emotions “stick” to particular bodies as signs. Though a different context, K-pop fan reactors cannot singularly contain fannish affect, but they also come to signify transnational fandom and their bodies circulate as such. JRE and the other seven chosen fans of *#mykpop* were not only meant to be relatable and function as “living proof” of K-pop’s global appeal, but also represent this fandom’s affective mobility, as they “portray the international K-Pop fandom that is currently occurring all over the world” (“*mykpop* Series Promo,” 2013). The *#mykpop* promo video, even before the series was released, emphasized where each fan came from as their pictures onscreen are overlaid with text stating their locations (in JRE’s case, “Miami”), and the series itself begins at an airport, with each of the fans arriving from their different destinations, meeting each other and generating excitement for the K-pop experience ahead. Through JRE’s circulation from Miami, where he lives and films reactions, to KCON 2013 in Los Angeles, he transforms into the transnational, affective mobility of the K-pop phenomenon itself and brings fandom performance to the forefront. His exemplariness is something to be celebrated, watched, and fanned over.

One could argue that the more popular reactors are more “celebrities” than they are fans at this point. In the years I have attended KCON, I have witnessed that first year when JRE was able to walk around relatively undisturbed, to the last year I attended (2016) when fans would wait for him outside the bathroom. However, while reactors are firmly entrenched in the K-pop machine, their performance is still rooted in fandom practices and fandom circulates with them and beyond them, as they are famous *for* their fandom; they do not embody the “just like us” ethos of popular celebrities but rather *are* us, whether we are exemplary fans or feel like bad examples. And due to the continued sheepishness fans exhibit regarding their fangirlish reactions, the judgement certain reactions receive from other fans, and the corporatization of fan reactions, perhaps all fan reactions are “bad” examples and ugly feelings, ones that are always negotiating what it means to be a transnational fan through bodily performances. JRE’s performance of fandom is used as a symbol of Hallyu’s transnational appeal, but it also shows how K-pop fandom has become inseparable from K-pop itself and an entertainment on its own, where transnational fandom performance is shared, debated, and circulated through embodied reactions.

## Chapter Two

### Crossing: Asian Americans, K-pop, and the Crossover State

In my Introduction and Chapter One, I examined two online fan practices – gifting on Tumblr and reaction videos on YouTube – and proposed that they are embodied performances that co-create media objects and circulate as their own performances, forming uneven networked collectives called transnational fandoms. As seen in Chapter One with K-pop fan reaction videos, K-pop fandom utilizes reactions to form transnational networks and transfer fannish practices through full body analysis, but those reactions also serve as a way fans evaluate each other through expectations of gender and race. While some fans may perpetuate stereotypical notions of race by critiquing marginalized fans’ reactions, others perform their fandom to reassert their identities within the transnational K-pop space. In this chapter and Chapter Four, I turn my attention to more traditional theatre performances to resituate theatre’s place in transnational transmedia circulation. One of my central claims in this dissertation is that theatre is an often overlooked, but crucial, part of K-pop and anime’s wider, mobile media ecology. Though these theatre shows are performed in “physical” space (i.e. not virtual, online space) they still engage with digital movement and fandom through both narrative themes and with the actors’ corporeal movements, showing not a separation between theatre and other media but an intertwining of the two. Additionally, the shows I examine are transnational and mobile in some aspect, with either transnational casts and crews, performances in multiple international locations, or both. These theatre shows each illustrate a facet of transnational fandom movement that complicates notions of one-way transmission in media circulation, or the belief that media moves from the “original” source/country out to the rest of the world.

This chapter takes the Off-Broadway musical *KPOP* as its subject, which was conceived of and written by playwright Jason Kim, with music and lyrics by Helen Park and Max Vernon. Additionally, three New York City-based theatre companies collaborated to produce the show: the Ma-Yi Theatre Company (an Asian American theatre company), the Woodshed Collective (a company that specializes in “immersive” theatre experiences), and Ars Nova (a theatre that develops new works). All three of these company’s priorities – immersive theatre, new play development, and Asian American representation – are central to the show and its structure as an interactive theater experience. *KPOP* critically asks *how* K-pop can “cross over” into the United States as mainstream music and if that scenario is even possible, given the history of racism in the mainstream, American music industry toward Asian and Asian American artists. According to journalists Cheng and Han (2017), Asian American musicians now often try and start their careers in Asia before coming back to the U.S. with bigger followings, due to what Chinese American hip-hop artist Yultron calls the “old, white gatekeepers” in the American music industry. While some of the Asian American musicians interviewed say they see the U.S. industry changing, many acknowledge they would not be able to produce music in the U.S. without the audiences and popularity they first generated in Asian markets.

Within the show, the narrative immediately draws the audience’s attention to their own reactions to K-pop by framing the story as an experiment for two fictional companies: JTM, a Korean entertainment company that trains and produces idol groups, and CROSSOVER, headed by Jerry Kim, a Korean-American who wants to help K-pop *cross over* into the American market. As the audience gathers around a stage at the beginning of the show, Jerry tells the audience they are a test audience, and that their reactions will be monitored during the show, which emphasizes how the audience members are active participants in the story. After an initial

introduction to this conceit, the audience splits into three groups and winds their way through different rooms to experience three K-pop acts: Special K, a new girl group; F8 (pronounced “Fate”), an established boyband; and MwE, a superstar diva and industry veteran. Jerry and the owners of JTM, Moon and Ruby, repeatedly emphasize throughout the performance how this whole set up is *for us*, the audience; the entire show is posed as an immersive experiment, constructed for an “American” audience, to ask *us* how K-pop can cross over into the U.S.

I attended a performance of *KPOP* at the A.R.T./NY Theater in September 2017. The show’s central question – how could K-pop be engineered for an “American” audience? – struck me as more appropriate for an earlier time. Maybe in 2009, when K-pop solo artist BoA and K-pop girl group Wonder Girls failed to break into the U.S. market, or in 2011, when K-pop girl group SNSD ultimately failed to do the same with their English single “The Boys,” despite promoting on mainstream U.S. television shows such as *The Late Show With David Letterman* and *Live! With Kelly and Michael*. The question would have still been appropriate in 2012, after Psy’s surprising success with “Gangnam Style,” as media outlets analyzed what made that K-pop song so successful after so many other attempts and K-pop companies questioned how they could replicate the same wide-spread response.

By 2017, however, K-pop had attained a different, larger level of popularity in the U.S. It struck me as ironic that, one night after I saw the show, with its focus on how to get American audiences interested in K-pop, I attended a sold-out K-pop concert for KARD (featured in Chapter One) at the Playstation Theater in NYC. That same year, KCON, the world’s biggest K-pop convention took place for the sixth time in both Los Angeles, CA, and Newark, NJ (in 2017 KCON also traveled to Mexico City; Chiba, Japan; and Sydney, Australia). In other words, I felt that K-pop had already “arrived” in the U.S. by the time *KPOP* debuted and questioned whether the show’s premise was outdated.<sup>1</sup> However, what is more important to me is how the show *answers* its own question about K-pop crossing over to the U.S. and what that means for Asian American fans and artists who have already wrestled with similar questions.

I argue that through its immersive, multimedia structure, *KPOP* reveals the complex, racialized intertwining of mediated idol and mediated audience, complicates the performance of Asian and Asian American identity, and ultimately, leads its audience to a different space than an “us vs. them” binary when viewing K-pop in the United States. To illustrate this, I take up *KPOP*’s repeated theme of “crossing over” and conceptualize a mode of embodied, transnational movement that I call a *crossover state*. The crossover state is made up of the numerous flows, adjustments, and crosses a body has taken, both virtual and physical, across a variety of geographic borders. These crossings are not one-way transmissions like the play’s conclusion ultimately promotes (from Korea to the U.S. or vice versa), but an unceasing crisscross that can move in any direction. Crucially, the crossover state is not static; it does not assume that the one crossing will eventually stop, but rather continue its transnational crossings, and therefore can only ever represent a cross-section of relations with numerous borders.

Moreover, *KPOP*’s focus on “crossing over” and my concept of crossover state interrogate assumptions on how transnational media circulation is supposed to go and who

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to dismiss arguments that it is still significant when there is major Asian and Asian American representation in U.S. mainstream media. It was not until 2018 that K-pop boyband BTS reached the top of the U.S. Billboard chart, becoming the first Korean act to do so. In 2017, it could be argued that K-pop still had a ways to go as no group had achieved [mainstream] milestones in the U.S. market that BTS and [other groups] would go on to achieve in 2018. However, I argue that BTS’ successes did not happen out of the blue; it is clear that in the years leading up to their success in the U.S. K-pop was becoming more and more popular.

determines what is considered “popular” or what has successfully crossed over. The show’s repetition of the word “crossover” is appropriate for a story about K-pop, a music phenomenon, when the term “crossover appeal” originated in and is widespread throughout the music industry. Crossover appeal means that a particular song or artist can appeal to multiple audiences interested in different musical genres. *KPOP*’s play with this concept in music shows how performing crossover appeal is tied to race, and specifically for K-pop, to the stereotypes and expectations of Asian and Asian American artists.

Therefore, I approach this musical and concept through Asian Americanist lens and analyze the way the producer characters coach the idols (who are Asian and Asian American) to adjust their mannerisms for an “American” audience, with the assumption that the American audience is predominantly white, or at least, non-Asian. This idea that an “American” audience will see any person of Asian heritage as non-American – even if that person was born in the U.S. – reinforces common stereotypes in the U.S. about Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (Shimakawa 2002). The idols’ performances within the play also produce a sense of what Karen Shimakawa (2002) calls “national abjection,” or a process that demands that Americanness be defined by the exclusion of Asian Americans, who are either cast as symbolic foreigners incapable of integration or Americanization or distorted into an “honorary” whiteness. However, rather than the idols changing their performance seamlessly or completely failing, the fissures that appear within their performances show the audience the many cultural affiliations they hold; this is doubly true for the Asian American characters, who already perform multiple crossings as “American” and also transnational, diasporic Asian subjects. Though the play may initially present the issue in nationalized terms as “Korea” versus “America,” the expectations placed upon the idols, and their inability to meet them, are deeply tied to Asian American racial performance in the United States and the ways K-pop itself has become an important digital practice for some Asian American creators.

Throughout this chapter, I will trace the multiple crossings *KPOP* demonstrates that make up the crossover state, from K-pop’s expansive media ecology to companies and audiences viewing K-pop idols’ bodies as mutable technologies, to K-pop’s intersections with Asian American creators online. The characters and artists in the show and wider Asian American diaspora constantly shift and negotiate these between identities, affiliations, and technologies, showing that crossing over is not about going from one place to another, but rather using that movement to define their experience as Asian Americans.

### **Before the Show: KPOP-Pourri and Digital Media**

*KPOP* the musical did not begin with the run of the show, but rather two months before in July 2017 with several forms of promotional materials from the Ma-Yi Theater Company in a segment they called “KPOP-Pourri.” Throughout their social media channels (Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) and promotional emails from that time, the company posted or emailed information that served as an introduction to the “K-pop experience.” In one marketing email (July 5, 2017), for example, “KPOP-Pourri” introduced a real-life K-pop entertainment company, special K-pop terminology, and the world of K-pop fandom, with links to fans’ YouTube videos. These YouTube videos were also part of a playlist the company put together called “What Is K-pop?” Additionally, Ma-Yi would post to their Instagram and Twitter accounts to introduce real-life K-pop bands. The emails and posts seemed to hail uninitiates who lacked basic knowledge about K-pop as an industry, a genre, and a scene, signaling that the

world of K-Pop was so vast that some needed guidance and training before even attending the show.

The emails and posts also swept the audience into K-pop's media sphere, showing how K-pop not only crosses geographical bounds, but also media formats. The "KPOP-Pourri" emails and social media posts showed ticketholders that K-pop includes music videos, songs, dances, special terminology, and fan content. As mentioned in the Introduction, Youna Kim (2013, 8) calls K-pop a "total entertainment," meaning that K-pop encompasses all entertainment forms, such as music, dance, television, movies, advertisements and more, with much of it happening through digital media. In fact, many Hallyu scholars argue that the K-pop industry relies on its ability to harness digital media and spread transnationally; the current number of groups simply could not survive economically by playing to the Korean market alone. Therefore, Kim claims, K-pop is so synonymous with digital media and transnational spread that it (and other Korean cultural productions that make up the Hallyu Wave) is not exported from Korea to the rest of the world, but rather is made of flows both outward and inward (14), and the "KPOP-Pourri" segments from Ma-Yi serve to bring the audience members into that world prior to the run of the live show.

While Ma-Yi's use of digital marketing places the musical into the wider K-pop sphere, it also illustrates the show's dedication to creating an immersive experience for its audience. This follows a more recent trend in theatre toward immersive shows, where the audience is not seated in a darkened theatre, but rather moves through various rooms and crafted spaces and interacts more directly with the actors, such as through having conversations with them. A well-known example of an immersive theatre show is PunchDrunk's *Sleep No More* at the McKittrick Hotel, which is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with a film noir aesthetic. Melanie E.S. Kohnen (2021) sees immersive theatre as an overlap with media fandom, as fan conventions such as San Diego Comic-Con are now prioritizing immersive "experiences" where the convention goers enter staged spaces related to different TV shows (for example, entering a room that is a carbon copy of the *Brooklyn 99* police headquarters) and participate in activities that immerse them in the story. So while in one way Ma-Yi appears to be breaking with theatrical conventions of liveness and event (meaning, one singular event at a set time) in order to prioritize a K-pop digital experience, they are also extending the bounds of recent immersive theatre practices to include giving the audience an experience prior to the run of the show.

Thus, *KPOP* as a musical and the "immersive, interactive" experience it offers to audiences fits well within K-pop's vibrant media ecosystem and also connects K-pop to theatre with its mixing of liveness and digital technology. Theatre scholar Suk-Young Kim (2018) emphasizes K-pop's "kaleidoscopic" or expansive multimedia performance, which includes not only the aforementioned forms, but also concerts, musicals, and other types of live performances. She also illustrates, through a thorough discussion of highly-mediatised concert performances, livestreaming technology, idol holograms, and other media forms that K-pop takes, that K-pop entangles what would be considered opposing keywords (live performance and digital technology), rather than treating them as distinct (9). Additionally, the K-pop industry has direct ties with Broadway-style musicals in South Korea, as K-pop idols regularly star in musicals. K-pop entertainment company SM Entertainment even develops its own idol musicals and has also built a large theatre space in its multimedia shopping complex, the SM Coex Artium in Seoul. Kim argues that K-pop, through its combinations of digital technologies and liveness, is a "powerful [transmitter] of complex sensory entanglement," that allows its audiences to "see

sound, hear vision, and touch feelings across various times and spaces” (4), making it more of a live, theatrical experience than one might initially expect.

*KPOP*'s promotional “KPOP-Pourri” segment puns on “potpourri,” a mixture of scents, perhaps alluding to the variety of sensory experiences within K-pop and immersive theatre. Importantly, these pre-show orientation emails and posts also emphasizes K-pop's transnational fandom, with its links to fan-made videos and glossaries of fan terminology, encouraging the audience to go further afield than the theater company's digital sphere and to actually engage with K-pop fandom online. Through “KPOP-Pourri,” the show communicates that in order to have a complete, “all-access” K-pop experience, ticketholders need to be immersed digitally in the world of K-pop before the show begins (or, rather, the “show” of K-pop starts *now*, weeks before the recipient of the emails goes to the performance), and they need to understand K-pop's multiple transmediations, including its online transnational fandom.

### **Special K, Cultural Technology, and Racial Performance**

While fans do not feature as characters in *KPOP* itself, the audience occupies the subject-position of fans while watching the show: like fans, audience members interact with K-pop music, performances, and performers, becoming knowledgeable about, and attached to, the idols who are characters in the show. *KPOP* delivers a stinging critique of the interactions between K-pop, media, and audiences in the section showing (fictional) new girl group Special K's journey through the “K-pop factory.” The show's use of the word “factory” alludes to the technological rhetoric widely applied to the K-pop industry – and particularly the idols – by journalists both in South Korea and abroad. The term “K-pop factory” refers to the idol training system in South Korea. Young adults audition for entertainment companies, and if selected and hired, they train for several years in singing, dancing, media, and foreign languages, with only a slim chance of debuting in an idol group. If they do debut, they initially have to work off the debt they accrued as trainees, because the company funded their training. In other words, though the K-pop industry may appear glamorous, the aspiring idols are low-paid employees who are treated like commodities that must repay their companies.

The technological imagery that the word “factory” evokes continues within K-pop industry rhetoric. SM Entertainment CEO Lee Soo Man coined the phrase “cultural technology” in the late 1990s, to describe his approach to making K-pop groups: an entertainment company's “cultural technology” means their step-by-step manual for training idols to sound, dance, and dress in specific ways for maximum transnational appeal (Seabrook 2012).<sup>2</sup> While not every company uses the specific term “cultural technology,” the influence of Lee's approach is seen in the way that most entertainment companies train and groom their idols, where their bodies perform as a technology that can be modified, through training, strict diets, and cosmetic surgery. Entertainment companies' training focuses not only on aspiring idols' individual singing and dancing skills, but also on preparing them for the idol job, which is not only to be a competent

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<sup>2</sup> I should note that Lee continues to think of idol groups in technological terms; in 2016, he presented a new concept for an idol group, called NCT, short for “Neo Cultural Technology,” that involves a roster of rotating members and several different incarnations in different countries, proposing a sort-of “networked” idol system. NCT debuted in 2016 and continues to expand.

singer and dancer, but to be a perfect worker, able to shift and transform in musical style, visual concept, and also transnational appeal and audience engagement.<sup>3</sup>

I want to note that I am not claiming that K-pop idols have no agency in this process, nor do I intend to promote a techno-Orientalist paradigm, which imagines Asia and Asians in hypertechnological terms, as robotic laborers, and as having an *intrinsic* relationship to technology (Roh et al. 2015). Rather, I want to draw attention to the technological rhetoric around K-pop idols, expressed in *KPOP*, media coverage on K-pop idols (both in South Korea and abroad), and in the industry itself. Lee Soo Man has continued to develop SM's production system and cultural technology as well; in a 2016 press conference, he revealed his "New Cultural Technology" system (NCT for short), which relies more on "interactivity," global fandom, and training idols from different countries in order to send them back to promote in that country. At the press conference, Lee also unveiled SM's latest boy band, also called NCT. NCT does not have a member limit, and the idea is that the "group" will be made of never-ending subunits that can simultaneously promote in other countries, like an expanded version of EXO (from my Introduction). In one way, with NCT, Lee and SM Entertainment are trying to build a truly networked idol group that can be dispersed around the world and tap into transnational fandom. In another, they are fulfilling the goal of having an idol group that never expires, where members can rotate and be replaced to suit the needs of the company. As K-pop companies continue to produce groups for transnational consumption, they look for new ways to produce those groups that relies on idols bodies being technologies that can shift and perform for different audiences, but also be replaced when needed.

In the section of *KPOP* focusing on the Special K girl group, the audience winds through four main rooms: dance studio, vocal coach, media training, and plastic surgery. The dance studio shows a choreographer picking apart the six members' movements, making them dance the routine over and over. Once the members exit to various other rooms, the choreographer turns to the audience, defiantly, saying that she might be tough, but because of her toughness, the girl group members will be "perfect." A similar scene occurs during vocal training, where an embittered vocal coach starts and stops one of the girls numerous times, berating her singing. However, since idol-training process is not only about singing and dancing, but also the idol's ability to shift and perform for different audiences, the group members also receive instruction on how to engage with American fans (let us keep in mind that the audience of *KPOP* are, presumably, mostly Americans). In the media training section, Jerry, the fictional CEO of CROSSOVER, berates member Callie for having a Korean accent that is, in his view, too pronounced. Jerry asks the audience, "Why hasn't K-pop succeeded in the U.S.?" When I saw *KPOP*, one audience member shouted in response, "Racism!" Jerry agreed, but then he reframed "racism" as an "accent problem," which seemed to justify why he was so hard on Callie, as if her saying "My name is Callie" in a perfect American accent would preclude Americans' negative stereotypes of and biases against Asians.

The idea that K-pop idols need to work hard to "blend in" with American culture recurs when Jerry does media training with member Tiny D, who is mixed race (Korean and white, and from Los Angeles). Jerry tells Tiny D that she does not look or act completely Korean or completely American, and therefore cannot "brand" herself accordingly. This confusion continues into the plastic surgery room and manifests as a fear of the way she is racially

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<sup>3</sup> I want to be careful to note that I am not claiming that K-pop idols have no agency in this process nor that they are more robotic than human. Rather, I want to draw attention to the technological rhetoric around K-pop idols, expressed in *KPOP* the musical and media coverage on K-pop idols, both in South Korea and abroad.

perceived. Tiny D says she is “50–50” (as in, she looks 50 percent Korean and 50 percent something else, unidentified), but she would prefer to look “70–30” or even “90–10,” though it is unclear which “look” she wants. As the scene happens, the audience stands outside the room, looking in through a large window, emphasizing how scrutinized K-pop idols’ bodies are. When I attended the performance, some audience members were visibly and audibly surprised that these healthy, young attractive performers were told to get plastic surgery, though it should be noted that plastic surgery is a common industry practice, and it is expected that the majority of K-pop idols will have plastic surgery. Eventually, Tiny D becomes too uncomfortable with the prospect of plastic surgery and leaves the room before the surgeon can begin, still unsure of her identity.

The Special K storyline in *KPOP* makes clear that K-pop companies train young performers in what Asian Americanist Ju Yon Kim calls “the racial mundane,” or everyday behaviors, “from inflections of speech and gesture to daily routines,” that become racially marked and come under racist scrutiny (2015, 3-4). In *KPOP*, Jerry isolates an obvious behavior (Callie’s accent) that has been the subject of tension for Asians and Asian Americans in the United States as an auditory marker of difference, instantly recognized and evaluated by listeners, for centuries. However, the racial mundane is not limited to auditory or visual markers; Kim also refers to habits, meaning repeated, daily activities that at first seem detached from physical tendencies. As an example, Kim points to the activity of “studying” and how more recent accounts of high-achieving Asian American youths’ routines such as doing homework, preparing for exams, and practicing musical instruments become simultaneously models to emulate and causes for concern, as Asian Americans are at once “hyperassimilated” and made strange. Revolving around this scrutiny of habits is the anxiety of whether the habits are *intrinsic* to their bodies, (as in, whether these habits are inherent to Asians) and therefore tied to the question of whether or not “Asian American” is really “American” (12-13).

Kim points out that these habits are mediated by cultural forms, and *KPOP* the musical makes the relationship between habits, racialization, technology, and theatricality explicit. During the “behind-the-scenes” tour, Callie is not able to perform a “perfect” English accent, and Tiny D is never given the chance to present herself without what Kim calls the theatrical “racial frame,” or the capturing of certain mannerisms and behaviors in relation to the racialized body (2015, 9). Rather, the show’s interrogation of “our” view of these habits is not about seeing how one habitual action becomes racialized, but about how malleable and slippery the racial mundane *is*. *KPOP* presents these behaviors to its audience as not only already racialized, but also as “technologies” that can be adjusted and employed based on audience expectations. Surprisingly, these over-animated mannerisms can have a paralyzing effect on their performers. When Tiny D sits in the mock-interview, with not only Jerry’s eyes on her, but also the audience’s, she is frozen from action because she does not know whether to perform “Koreanness” or “whiteness,” and I would argue, her character is confused as to what those performances would look like. The play never establishes what a performance of Koreanness or whiteness would really look like, but even the thought of trying to do one or the other is enough to confound and immobilize Tiny D. Jerry, frustrated, just wants her to choose *one* racialized performance, because if there is dissonance between the acts and the body, she will not be acceptable to “us,” the American audience.<sup>4</sup> However, Tiny D’s inability to act paradoxically also *activates* the process of opening up a “productive suspense” that Kim describes, where tension and contradiction between the

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<sup>4</sup> Kim argues that while the relationship between the body and racial mundane is already tense, but their theatricalization makes this tension explicit.

racial mundane and the body are thrown into stark relief and in this space of ambiguity lies the opportunity for change (9).

It seems this change must come from audience members and idols, though—not from the entertainment companies that comprise the “K-pop factory.” The Special K section of *KPOP* allows the audience to see the idols as mutable and consumable objects, as well as hard workers, and because audiences experience it as a backstage tour, and are asked to respond to questions by the various trainers and witness the girl group’s interactions with trainers up close, an affective bond develops between idols and audiences during the show. At the performance of *KPOP* I attended, after I witnessed Callie undergoing “accent training,” Callie pulled me into a small room, and initiated a private conversation. She asked, “Which one sounds best?” She then proceeded to say “My name is Callie” three different ways. I hesitated; they all sounded the same to me. I said, “Three, maybe?” for no reason. Then, I revised my statement: “I don’t know, you sound fine. You sound *good*.” Callie thanked me, seeming relieved, or maybe happy. As I exited the room, I felt disappointed in myself; I think I should have told her simply to love herself and not worry about her accent. Why did I even give credence to Jerry’s “accent training”? I realize that this section is about having the audience interact with not only the idols, but also the system that creates the idols. It implicitly argues that we, the audience, cannot feel an affective connection to the idols through polished performance alone, but rather we have to understand the process they have gone through, and how we, the audience, the fans—as the entire reason they are going through it—are complicit. However, the play also asks us, as audience members and potential or current K-pop fans, to recognize that we have the power to give feedback to idols, and by extension, to the K-pop companies, that honors difference and uniqueness, rather than reinforcing the industry’s expectation that all “we” want is for Korean pop stars to sound, look, and act “American.”

However, when Jerry says that “we” are the test audience, that “we” hold the answer to if K-pop can cross over to the United States—I wonder *which* audience is being framed in *what way*? Initially, the show presumes that most Americans are unfamiliar with K-pop and that K-pop has to modify its stars and products to suit our tastes, but this problem becomes more complicated when the show’s audience turns out to be quite transnational and transcultural. Looking around the room, I see the ways that the audience at the performance I attended both exceeds the show’s expectation and is still limited in relation to K-pop’s global circulation. For example, while the audience appears to be multiracial, it is also a New York City audience that has access to and knowledge of Off-Broadway theatre. Interspersed with the “general” audience, there are also theatre journalists and reviewers, conspicuously scribbling notes on pads of paper (conspicuous because every member of the audience can see every other member throughout the show), bringing the New York City theatre scene into the room and serving as a reminder that this audience can represent only one facet of an “American” audience. However, there are also audience members that exceed the show’s audience expectations in that they demonstrate more transcultural perspectives and experiences than the show may assume. There are audience members that clearly understand Korean, as they respond in the language whenever the performers speak Korean, and there are also audience members like me that know about K-pop, and maybe already consider themselves fans (I notice K-pop swag, like buttons, on the clothing or bags of some). Some attendees may not have represented their fandom outwardly, but nonetheless appeared to be knowledgeable about K-pop, nodding knowingly as the characters explain the K-pop system.

The show's script does not acknowledge the possible multiple affiliations of its audience members, and prefers we identify ourselves and the idols primarily along lines of nationality. During a scene with boyband F8, newest member Epic – who was born and raised in Korea but is ethnically mixed, with a Korean mother and white American father – argues with the older members about the direction the band is going. The other members like their older songs and old musical style; Epic thinks that if they are to branch out into the United States, they need to update their sound. Group member Oracle then draws a literal line on the floor with some chalk, asking the audience to choose a side with whomever they agree, Epic clearly symbolizing an American point of view (as he admits his sound is “more Bruno Mars than Rain”), and Oracle standing in for Korea and an older K-pop style. In the performance I saw, the audience divided, while myself and another audience member decide to stand on the line itself, in the middle. Another audience member yells at us, “That’s cheating!” At the time, I could only utter a bewildered “What?” but afterward I thought, what is “cheating” in this scenario? Is it the attempt at acknowledging both sides, or perhaps, trying to have it both ways? As a biracial Asian American audience member, I felt closely aligned with characters like Epic, Tiny D, and Jerry, and I gravitated toward that line – that intersecting, ambivalent space – not to “cheat” the system in some way, but because being right on the line, occupying the in-between, felt familiar and most resonated with my own worldview. However, to at least one other audience member, the “line,” or middle space—the zone of hybridity and bothness—was not an option.

### **Asian American YouTubers, Boys Generally Asian, and Digital K-pop Practices**

The fact that the *KPOP* marketing materials, script, and tone of address presume that the audience knows nothing about K-pop, and may not understand or accept it, led me to speculate that the show's intended audience is American, but not Asian American. Though K-pop may be new to some Americans, several scholars have noted that Asian Americans have long formed a core of strong transnational supporters of the industry (see Park 2004; Balance 2012; Ju and Lee 2015), due to K-pop's heavy promotion and circulation in Asia and Asian diasporas. One reason that Asian Americans may have gravitated towards K-pop earlier than other Americans could be an alignment between Asian Americans and K-pop idols. It is not uncommon to see Korean Americans and Asian Americans in K-pop groups, and the Ma-Yi Theatre Company probably chose to produce *KPOP* due in part because the script requires Asian and Asian American cast members. I contend that the juxtaposition of K-pop and an established Asian American theatre company ties K-pop together with Asian American performers and audience members and asks what potential K-pop can open up for them, if any at all. However, not all Asian Americans have a familiarity with Asian pop culture products, as Jerry is quick to point out at the beginning of *KPOP*. Jerry is Korean American, and when explaining why he wanted to partner with JTM, he calls himself a “bad” Korean and relates his own failed attempt at trying to be an actor in Korea, because he does not speak Korean or understand the culture very well—but all of this already indicates a much more complicated, emotional relationship to K-pop for Jerry than blank unknowing, as he has now made it his *mission* to get these particular parts of his identity to cross over, or at least meet. Throughout the play, we also see how conflicted Jerry is about K-pop, as he coaches Callie and Tiny D to perform set racialized identities, indicating that he has yet found a way to get these parts of his identity to sit comfortably within himself.

Asian American scholar Christine Bacareza Balance (2012) points to another connection between K-pop and Asian Americans, or rather, Asian American YouTube stars and their similar

affective virtual networks. Balance notes the affective labor popular YouTube stars like Ryan Higa (nigahiga), Kevin Wu (kevjumba), and Wong Fu Productions perform, which is able to transform “alienation into humor, hate into love,” and how the platform's penchant for both the intimate and the “viral” (spread) creates an affective Asian American community (149). Balance compares this affective network to K-pop's transnational dissemination online, as an embodiment of the Korean diaspora. Hyejung Ju and Soobum Lee (2015, 334) come to a similar conclusion in their article on Asian American K-pop consumption and how its flow creates a sense of pan-ethnic Asian identity for the fans they interviewed.<sup>5</sup> And as Lori Kido-Lopez and Vincent N. Pham (2017, 3) point out, digital, networked Asian American communities shift Asian American media's purview beyond the geographical location of the United States, but rather to the locations of its users and their interconnected networks, much like K-pop. These confluences of digital, affective networks between Asian American media and K-pop show that K-pop intersects with Asian Americans not only through representation, but also digital practices. Again, I want to note that I do not say this to replicate a techno-Orientalist paradigm. Rather, my focus on technology is about recognizing the affective, uneven, and mediatized ways that Asian diasporic audiences are transnationally connected, and how K-pop runs through their online networks.<sup>6</sup>

While *KPOP* does not assume its audiences are majority Asian American, the crossings and slippages of its Asian American characters, and its broader links to the Asian American community, demonstrate that Asian Americans are an important part of K-pop's ecosystem. However, rather than only being a part of *K-pop*'s ecosystem, the musical and the YouTubers it connects to also shows that K-pop is an important part of Asian American digital practices, whether that means an embrace, a rejection, a parody, or a discomforted sliding between “Asian” and “American.” This is perhaps why when noted Asian American YouTube star Ryan Higa created a parody K-pop group, he called it BgA, or Boys Generally Asian. This group draws attention to both the fetishization of K-pop idols (as recognizably “Asian” and marketed as such), and the impossibility of clearly defining the geographical boundaries of K-pop groups (as the group is not fully Asian but *generally* Asian, implying that “Asian” can encompass a large range of identities. Other members in the group are also prominent Asian American YouTubers: Philip Wang (co-creator of Wong Fu Productions), David Choi, Justin Chon, and Jun Sung Ahn. Ahn is perhaps the most like a K-pop idol and associated with the industry, as he gained notoriety for his K-pop violin covers, performed at KCON, and has released several pop singles.<sup>7</sup> BgA has released two singles on YouTube thus far, “Dong Saya Dae” (2016) and “Who's It Gonna Be?” (2017), both of which topped the iTunes K-pop charts and drew international attention, showing that though the songs were parodies, the transnational digital networks associated with K-pop and these Asian American YouTube stars go hand-in-hand with the affective intimate connections fans have to them.

Higa and the other members locate “general” Asianness as an essential, defining feature of K-pop and one that they themselves can claim as Asian Americans. In their first music video,

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars often question and complicate this sense of global Asian community through Asian pop culture, as it suggests a practice of community building through consumerism; see Cho (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Konrad Ng argues that though not all Asian Americans have the same access and relationship to digital cultures, the documenting of Asian American life online (mostly via YouTube) acts as an alternate archive of Asian American narratives beyond the “official story” or national narratives told in traditional museums (2014, 264-265).

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that YouTube is not these members *only* profession, as they all work in various parts of the entertainment industry. However, many of them gained fame through YouTube and currently maintain YouTube channels.

“Dong Saya Dae,” they begin with a skit that shows the (fictional) formation of BgA. Higa and the other members are at a party, staring at a group of women who are watching K-pop videos on a laptop and fanning out over the idols. Higa’s group expresses confusion over the women’s interest; Higa even asks, “How can you love something so much [that] you don’t even understand?” which both echoes the questions K-pop fans often hear from non-fans (much to their chagrin), and distances Higa from the K-pop fans and idols. Even though he is Asian American, he does not feel an affinity for the idols, at least for now. Philip Wang (soon to be known as “P-Dragon,” a wordplay on the name of famous K-pop idol “G-Dragon”) cuts in: “What’s there to get, man? It’s a group of really good-looking Asian guys that can sing AND dance.” Here, Wang does not say that K-pop idols are good-looking Korean guys, which would separate them by nationality, but rather already points to the transnational Asian crossings that make up K-pop groups. He does, however, reduce the women’s interest to that of sexual attraction, and later, Justin Chon also explains K-pop’s draw through the idols’ physical qualities: “You know, they’re all *K-POP*... they got rows of abs... like nine...” (which also harkens back to the affective power of abs in Chapter Two). Higa then says, “Well, we’re a group of good-looking Asian —” then he stops short, everyone disagreeing with him that they are good-looking. Higa tries again saying they can sing (“no”) and dance (“no”), finally landing on “Well, we’re all Asian!” to which everyone agrees. “You can learn to sing and dance. You can’t learn to be Asian!” Higa exclaims. They decide to form a K-pop group.

Though there are Korean and Korean American members within BgA, the group’s identity as “generally Asian”—their shared Asianness—is all that is required to make a K-pop group. Every other aspect of performance in the song and video is supposedly “fake,” as Higa autotunes their voices and they hire dancers to act as “body doubles” during a rigorous dance sequence. Even when Wang brings up the fact that they cannot speak Korean, the group turns to member David Choi to write their lyrics, because he is Korean American,<sup>8</sup> despite Choi saying he “kinda” knows Korean. This results in an inappropriate song title, a mistranslation of “Girl, you’re the sh\*t” as “Girl, I have to take a sh\*t,” the joke being that Choi is not that fluent despite being Korean American, a situation that many Asian Americans find themselves in. The entire song is filled with incorrect Korean, which BgA subtitles to ensure the audience knows they cannot speak Korean. In the video, the only requirement for the members to start a band is their Asianness, while everything else can be worked around, including the Korean language, which is simultaneously necessary (as they do not sing primarily in any other language) and unnecessary (as the group shows no embarrassment over the incorrect Korean). Perhaps in the fiction of the video the group members do not know they are speaking incorrectly, but the presence of the subtitles indicates they are in on the joke. Rather than trying to simulate a “perfect” performance of Koreanness (or K-pop-ness), BgA loudly and intentionally revels in their imperfections.

Scholars such as Balance, Kim, and Konrad Ng (2014) analyze the way Asian American YouTube videos critique, reaffirm, or struggle with Asian American identity through performance, whether it be through direct confrontation of stereotypes (for example, Wong Fu Productions’ “Yellow Fever” or Kevin Wu’s “My Dad Is Asian”) or through everyday performances (tutorials, vlogs, skits) that do not center race. In fact, Kim and Ng point out that many videos from Asian American YouTubers do not explicitly talk about race, yet their racialized experience circulates throughout their videos. For example, Ng analyzes Jeremy Lin’s

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<sup>8</sup> This is despite the fact that member Jun Sung Ahn is Korean and speaks Korean fluently; in BgA, Ahn is either playing a character that cannot speak Korean or he is too reticent to say anything.

video “How to Get Into Harvard ft. Ryan Higa,”<sup>9</sup> where Lin instructs Higa on how to get into Harvard University, through invoking overexaggerated Asian American stereotypes such as being over-achieving math and violin virtuosos (Ng 2014, 269), which draws attention to their constructedness, even though Lin does not say this explicitly. Higa plays the “straight man” to Lin’s caricature, eagerly taking notes. While Ng reads Higa’s participation as a nod to the authority of online Asian American popular culture, Kim points to this classic parody set up of overexaggerated caricature and “straight man” as one of the main ways Asian American YouTubers establish their ordinariness:

Setting markedly stylized, spoofed, and embellished characters against the more natural personae crafted and maintained by the videos’ stars, these performances emphasize the latter’s familiarity. The mundane thus does double duty: it establishes the videos’ concerns as commonplace, and makes possible a turn to caricature and theatrics that sets the Asian American performer, by contrast, as ordinary. (2015, 233)

Most YouTubers rely on the aesthetics of ordinariness to connect with and maintain an audience, but for Kim, Asian American YouTubers’ celebration of ordinariness or the mundane turns into a performance that dissects and sometimes resists racial stereotypes.<sup>10</sup> Through the practice of filming and uploading videos to YouTube, Asian American YouTubers also define repertoires of Asian Americanness that shift and change in conjunction with new media. Therefore, BgA turns K-pop – with all its technologies and embodied practices – into a repertoire for their contemporary Asian American experience that flows transnationally.

However, though *KPOP* and the Asian American YouTube sphere draw attention to the constructed nature of racial performance and stereotype, a concept of Asianness still circulates within transnational fandom as an important component of K-pop, which allows certain groups an ability to claim or play with K-pop over others. For example, another American-made K-pop group, EXP Edition, which is composed of primarily non-Asian members, has received backlash from transnational K-pop fans. EXP Edition began as an MFA thesis project for producer Bora Kim at Columbia University, in collaboration with Karin Kuroda and Samantha Shou. Kim saw K-pop’s popularity rise transnationally and wanted to see if she could make a K-pop boyband out of American members, by teaching them how to sing in Korean and “act like Korean boys” (O’Connor, 2017). Out of the four current members of EXP Edition, only one of them has partial Asian ancestry, and most fans see them as a non-Asian group.<sup>11</sup> The band moved to Korea after Kim finished her MFA and have tried to break into the competitive K-pop scene. Their reception among transnational fans has been mixed at best; many do not consider them K-pop, because they were not initially produced in South Korea and the members did not go through the extensive training process illustrated in the musical *KPOP*. EXP Edition are often criticized by general K-pop fans for their “bad” Korean language skills and cultural appropriation, accusations

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<sup>9</sup> Prior to becoming a pro basketball player, Jeremy Lin had a YouTube channel. He stopped uploading as of 2018.

<sup>10</sup> I would like to note that some scholars have written about the cultural appropriation presented by these YouTubers from Black American culture, to acknowledge that their videos are complicated and not wholly unproblematic objects. Additionally, by focusing too much on Asian American YouTubers, there is a danger of perpetuating one view of Asian American experience as middle class, heterosexual, cisgender male, and technologically savvy.

<sup>11</sup> Initially, there were two Black members in EXP Edition, totaling six members. When the group decided to move to Korea and pursue K-pop seriously, those two members left the group.

that are never thrown at BgA. When I say “general” K-pop fans, I mean fans of K-pop overall, and not specifically for EXP Edition, though the group has their own fans who claim in the comments for their music videos that the members have gotten better at Korean.

It is important to remember that BgA is a parody group and not trying to be an official K-pop group in the way that EXP Edition is, and they are fully funded by Higa himself. Nearly everything in “Dong Saya Dae” is self-deprecating; though they can form a K-pop group due to their shared Asianness, they simultaneously fail at everything else that defines K-pop groups, which *KPOP* demonstrates – “perfection” in singing, dancing, and body image. This failure illustrates a blend of Kim’s racial mundane, where the audiences sees actions that code BgA as “Asian” through K-pop, and Ng’s ordinary mundane, as through failure, the members resist perfect, model minority behavior. In comparison, EXP Edition claims that they *are* representative of K-pop through certain aesthetic choices (clean-shaven faces, bright colors, Korean lyrics) and presents themselves as a competitive K-pop group, or capable of competing for a place in the K-pop market (whereas BgA is not trying to compete in that market, but rather the market of YouTube parody videos). However, EXP Edition has not gone through the traditional entertainment training structure in Korea or being able to make a collective claim to Asianness. Michelle Hahm (2018) argues that the issue is not a matter of whether EXP Edition is simply Asian or not, but rather their place in the complex racial contexts and flows of K-pop. As a market that is both over-saturated and a space for Asian and Asian American performers, Hahm sees the amount of money and press EXP Edition has received as evidence of white privilege both in South Korea and abroad. Some fans that argue against these criticisms by pointing out that not all K-pop idols come from Korea, or that K-pop songs blend different styles and genres, taking influence from many different cultures (particularly U.S. pop and hip-hop), but it is clear from fandom conversations and debates that performers’ Asianness, even if it is not nation-specific, is an important, even defining, component of K-pop for fans.

Another important element of BgA’s success is their ability tap into fan networks for both K-pop and Asian American YouTubers, and even focusing more on fandom activities and practices within their videos. BgA performs a fannishness that transnational K-pop fandom recognizes as a fan practice. In a *Seoulbeats* article on reaction videos (which I cited in Chapter One), writer Hannah (2017) argues that BgA’s videos count as *reaction* videos, pulling them into fandom practice rather than industry practice, or rather, situating fandom practices as just as important as industry practices. For example, BgA’s second single, “Who’s It Gonna Be?” (2017), foregrounds K-pop fandom as their number one concern, as the video opens with a skit of the members trying to decide their fandom name, fandom color, and next single. During this skit, member Justin antagonizes member Jun while simultaneously putting his arm around him. The subtitles provided by BgA tell us this is “\*fanservice\* I can hear fans nosebleeding now,” showing how BgA theatricalizes a common fandom and industry practice of shipping members together by playing up the *tsundere* trope (a character that appears to dislike another character secretly likes them) from Japanese manga, anime, and video games.<sup>12</sup>

Later in the video, Justin and Jun make up and almost hug (which the subtitles tell us is “fanservice” again), but Justin cannot go through with it, instead punching Jun in the shoulder and calling him “idiot.” Here, the subtitles show the words: “Idiot [Baka].” “Baka” (バカ) is the Japanese word for “idiot,” and while translated into English may sound severe, it is often used in media in an affectionate way; a character may call another “idiot” in seriousness, but more often,

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<sup>12</sup> *Tsundere* (ツンデレ) is the Japanese word for this character trope. In Korean the word is *choondere* (춘테레).

a character uses the term when the character they like does something endearingly foolish. Inserting the Japanese word “baka,” which is heavily associated with anime for transnational fans, instead of the Korean word “pabo” (also “idiot,” and used in similar contexts), does not show complete fidelity to Korean media texts, but rather a blending together of Asian global media, particularly those associated with Asian diasporas (anime and K-pop). In their video, BgA perform transnational K-pop fandom by acknowledging fandom in the K-pop industry (fandom color, fandom name) or a fandom practice (fanservice), and also through a blending of Korean and Japanese popular culture. However, BgA are also performing as millennial Asian Americans who grew up with access to transnational Asian media and the internet. They simultaneously perform their fandom for Asian pop culture products and use those products to perform their roles as Asian American content creators.

### **Endings and Beginnings: The Crossover State**

In contrast to this expansiveness and complexity of Asian American digital practices, the explicit message of the *KPOP* show seems to promote an either/or mentality with respect to K-pop, nationality, race, and localization, meaning that the show reinforces K-pop as a solely Korean cultural product and the American audience members as having no prior connection to K-pop. At the end of the show, JTM CEO Moon announces to the audience, now all reconvened, that this experiment was a mistake. He apologizes to Jerry, then proclaims: “We don't need to cross over to you, *you need to cross over to us.*” The audience cheers, as if this is a satisfactory answer to *KPOP*'s central question, whether or not K-pop can cross over to us. I remained skeptical; while I appreciate the show's assertion that the U.S. is not the arbiter of what is popular transnational media (K-pop, as an industry, is already successful and does not *need* the “approval” of U.S. audiences), I did not feel that answer accounts for the other tensions and contradictions brought up throughout the show. What about all the scenes underscoring the complex relations the Asian American characters had with K-pop, Korea, Asia, and the United States? What about all the audience members that nodded or exclaimed in recognition at the lines spoken in Korean or at the industry practices in the show, effectively affirming that they had already done some *crossing* and that K-pop was already a part of their cultural landscape?

After Moon's proclamation, the show ends with a spectacular concert, complete with celebratory projections of a Korean flag on the moon and confetti cannons. The groups and idols take to the stage, executing choreography with sharpness and precision and belting perfect notes, and a thought flashes through my mind: *They could totally be K-pop idols.* As far as the musical was concerned, the actors' transformation into K-pop idols was complete, their hard work paying off, not just as characters, but as actors who had to be “good” enough, be believable enough, to be the perfect workers. I look around the room at the audience members' excited faces, some people even shouting the idols' names as they come onstage or the occasional, encouraging “fighting!” cheer, and I believe the show has succeeded in making them K-pop fans, at least for the night. And maybe that is answer enough, to demonstrate that yes, Americans can accept K-pop. However, I do not know where that leaves me, or Jerry, or Tiny D, those of us who were not allowed to stand on the chalk line; or who still feel like “bad” Asians; or who could not choose which identity to make the “70%” in the plastic surgery room. As the show's conclusion draws a firm line, with the United States on one side and Korea (and presumably the rest of Asia) on the other, those of us who shuttle back and forth between the two spaces—and even more spaces than that—do not know where we stand.

Beyond the theater space, the show won three Lucille Lortel Awards and critics hailed it as a success.<sup>13</sup> As Ashley Park (who played superstar diva character MwE) said when she received her award for Best Actress: “I thought, you know it's never gonna happen because nobody in the American Theater is going to take the risk on a story about Korean Americans crossing over into mass media in America. And guess what? [They] did” (promotional email, May 10, 2018). The conflation of “Korean Americans” with the show’s mostly Korean characters (and the idea that they, though American, still need to “cross over” to a mainstream (white) American audience) seems to reiterate the constant in-between space that Asian American performers hold in American media, where they are viewed as not quite American enough and not quite Asian enough. It also reiterates the thought that Asian American performers’ success is dependent on the success of *Asian* performers, meaning that only when mainstream U.S. media audiences accept Asian performers (from Asia) will they accept Asian *American* performers, which reinforces the stereotype that Asian Americans are not American enough to represent “Americans” in U.S. entertainment.

*KPOP*’s finale suggests that the “solution” is for the audience to simply cross over from a U.S. perspective to a Korean perspective, as if all they needed to do to become K-pop fans is to step over the line drawn on the floor during the F8 segment of the show. However, I contend that “crossing over” is not a single line drawn on the floor. Even if the show’s solution does promote a straightforward crossing from A to B, the characters and narratives shown prior to the show’s run and during the bulk of the show’s content tell a different story. From K-pop’s transmedia crossings and transnational fan networks, to the ways K-pop idols transform themselves to suit a new album concept or audience, to how one subset of the audience—at least for the scope of this chapter—is already familiar with a surprisingly similar negotiation, even as it plays out differently in individual circumstances, *KPOP* shows that “crossing over” is not a unidirectional step from one place to another and it is neither simple nor easy.

What does it mean when you have crossed multiple times, both physically and virtually? When those crossings are so intertwined, they bleed into each other, overlap, and were never that divided in the first place? *KPOP* is a show about crossing, but the “crossing” that it talks about is not a matter of simply crossing *over* a line, nor being stuck between two countries, nor a matter of feeling not foreign enough or not American enough, but rather, of being in a *crossover state*. This crossover state is not static but made up of the flow and movement of the numerous crosses we have taken, both virtual and physical. The moments of crossing in the show—from audience to fan, from medium to medium, from live theatre to digital space, and across the web of Asian diaspora—reflect a much more complex sense of transnational movement than the finale would suggest.

To go back to a moment in the show, during Tiny D’s media training with Jerry, he begins to press her on what her “brand” is, both for the American audience watching and how she might brand herself in the future. She looks dubious and then says, “This isn’t gonna last forever, right?” Here Tiny D is referring to the girl group, Special K, and specifically her time in it. In this moment Tiny D shows awareness that she, like many K-pop idols, will be treated like a disposable technology despite all the work put into molding herself, her body, and her movements. In one way, this line reads almost defeatist, as if Tiny D is asking what all this hard work is for if the job has such a short lifespan. In another way, it is hopeful, as she acknowledges that the expectations and adjustments in her performance will not last forever; in other words,

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<sup>13</sup> The Lucille Lortel awards are for excellence in off-Broadway productions. *KPOP* won for best musical, best actress, and best featured actor.

Jerry's opinions and media training will not be relevant for her in so many years. She sits slumped in her chair, arms crossed, her refusal to choose one "side" or facet of her identity also acknowledges the impossibility of making one permanent crossing when she has already spent her life crossing borders and boundaries. Perhaps her line, "This isn't gonna last forever, right?" is also a gesture to the continual movement in the crossover state, that she will not be stuck with one, limited idea of crossing from one country to the next. It may not always feel comfortable to negotiate the hybridity she feels—as exemplified by Jerry's character and his comment that he is a "bad" Korean—but the continual movement in and between numerous spaces define her more than choosing a side.

I should note that while the crossover state is not exclusive to Asian Americans, Asian American scholars have noted the different ways Asian American celebrities continually cross different technological and entertainment genres. The concept of crossover state shares resonances with L.S. Kim's (2017) idea of the "matrix stage." Speaking of Asian American celebrities that utilize a multi-platform approach to creating and disseminating their work, such as Wong Fu Productions, Kim's matrix stage is comprised of "venues such as broadcast television, cable television, online series, internet channels, and live performances," and includes all participants involved in producing and consuming such content, from artists to fans (175). Most importantly, the matrix stage intertwines the "margins" of entertainment with "mainstream" venues (such as the stars' ability to shift from film and TV to online media). Rather than viewing their "success" as a linear narrative from online personas to "mainstream" stars in Hollywood films, Asian American celebrities are constantly crossing between these different platforms. Kim defines the matrix stage as specifically an Asian American media practice that allows Asian Americans more flexibility to collaborate and maneuver across spaces and represent a wider variety of Asian American experiences (175). Kim's concept illustrates how Asian American celebrities are already adept at crossing through various mediums, and their utilization multiple platforms opens them to greater opportunities and audiences.

However, while my concept is similar to Kim's in that it connects Asian American YouTube stars who operate on the matrix stage to K-pop idols performing on transnational transmedia stages, I am more focused on the embodied performances that make up the crossover space, rather than transmedia strategies. Even before the show, *KPOP* was asking its audience to cross over from the theatre space to the digital space of K-pop fandom, alluding to the complex intertwining of live bodies and digital performances already present in K-pop itself, from both idols and fans. During the show, the idols' bodies are shown to be technologies that they must continually mold depending on the audience, but also how their looks, movements, and gestures have already been racialized and how these characters are already crossing into various spaces between Korea, Asia, the United States, and the Asian Diaspora as they try to figure out where they fit in. I also had my own experience of trying to embody the crossover state, as I stood in the middle of the chalk line on the floor during the F8 section, unwilling to choose one "side" over the other, much like Tiny D was unwilling to change the balance of her "50-50" appearance in the plastic surgery room. The Asian American characters in the show and in the audience exhibit these crossings, which then cross over to Asian American YouTuber's use of K-pop performance in online space to negotiate their identities in an industry that is constantly looking at them as an outsider. While *KPOP* assumes that Americans would be unwilling cross over and that they *have not already* crossed in any sense of the word, their performers and (at least certain) audience members are enacting the multi-directional, multi-valent embodied crossings

that idols make and that the Asian American actors have had to make in the entertainment industry.

If *KPOP* began prior to the show's official run with the introduction to K-pop expansive media ecology, I wonder what extends beyond its confetti-filled ending and beyond the awards shows. Currently in 2021, the show is in production for a Broadway run. However, much has changed in the K-pop landscape in the United States since 2017 (and had been changing prior to 2017 as well, as I discussed). In November 2017, K-pop boyband BTS was the first K-pop act to perform at the American Music Awards, and in 2018, broke numerous records with their album *Love Yourself: Tear* becoming the first K-pop album to debut on the U.S. *Billboard* 200, and the first foreign language album to do so in 12 years. At the time of this writing, it seems like the question of whether K-pop can cross over to the U.S. has been answered many times over, so the question becomes where will *KPOP* go in its next Broadway iteration? What crossings will it highlight and emphasize? How will it answer its question now? While the show's creators work through those considerations, the Asian American performers associated with the show and beyond continue their multiple crossings. Though BgA is on indefinite hiatus, Ryan Higa has talked about making a BgA movie, and Asian American YouTubers are still incorporating K-pop and other Hallyu media into their online works (such as Wong Fu Productions featuring BgA member Philip Wang in their short "My Office Became a K-Drama" [2020]). And incidentally, I recently caught a show where Katie Lee Hill, who played Tiny D in *KPOP*, starred as another Asian American pop star trying to figure out her place in pop music, though through the lens of 2003 American pop girl groups (*Tiger Beat* by Kaela Mei-Shing Garvin). While the issue of K-pop crossing over to the U.S. reinforces a one-way binary, "us" versus "them" no matter which side you are on, the embodied crossings presented in the show, of K-pop idols, the actors, Asian American YouTube stars, and the audience members and fans of the wider Asian Diaspora continue to move within a crossover state, redefining what it means to "cross" transnational borders.

### Chapter Three

#### Dating: Queer Loops in Transnational Dating Game Parodies

In April 2011, Japanese illustrator Hato Moa released *Hatoful Boyfriend* (Japanese title: *Hātōfuru Kareshi*), a humorous video game about a human dating various pigeons in a post-apocalyptic Japan, which rose to unexpected global popularity, commercial success, and overwhelmingly positive reviews from major gaming news outlets in Japan, North America, and Europe. Another testament to the game's success was its numerous spin-offs, such as a sequel game, comic books, radio shows, and merchandise, including two successful Kickstarters for plush stuffed animal pigeons. *Hatoful Boyfriend's* success was a surprise to gamers and critics alike for several reasons, such as its absurd, pigeon-dating premise and its humble beginnings as a solo-created project by an indie designer rather than a big budget studio. However, most of all, critics were surprised because *Hatoful Boyfriend* is a parody of dating games, an already maligned genre of game within the gaming community due to its focus on romantic storylines. Though the dating game genre originated in Japan, *Hatoful Boyfriend's* success illuminated the category's dedicated global fanbase and spawned an uptick in dating game parodies, from both small and large developers, including ones in which human characters date different non-human animals, and also date monsters (as in *Monster Prom* [2018]), Internet-meme dads (*Dream Daddy* [2017]), weapons (*Boyfriend Dungeon* [forthcoming]), and Colonel Sanders of KFC (*I Love You, Colonel Sanders!* [2019]).

This chapter examines dating game parodies as a form of queer game design by using two independent, English-language (or available in the English language) parodies as a jumping-off point: *Hatoful Boyfriend* and *Tusks: The Orc Dating Sim* (2017) created by queer Scottish game designer Mitch Alexander. I define dating games overall as a genre where love and intimate relationships are the primary narrative focus, and where gameplay revolves around dating or other relationship-building activities. The goal of these games is to successfully gain the affection of a certain partner by choosing the correct options at key points to advance the story, and sometimes through boosting certain character stats, to get what is termed the “good” ending for that character (see Figure 1). After the player finishes one route, they are supposed to replay the game to try and partner with every romanceable character. Dating games are also closely related to another game genre called “visual novels” and often share visual novels' style and mechanics. Visual novels combine onscreen narrative text with 2-D background visuals and character sprites and utilize a branching narrative format. However, visual novels do not necessarily need to be about romance, which is why I use the term “dating game.” Additionally, dating games might incorporate different mechanics besides branching narratives, and may combine visual novel graphics with other styles of graphics, so while their features and design overlap heavily with visual novels, the two genres are not exactly the same.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, I consider dating game *parodies* to be any game that somehow subverts traditional dating game structure through narrative, game mechanics, or both. In this chapter, I argue that dating game parodies are a transnational fan practice that utilize embodied performance, queer game design, and Asian popular culture to expose how gaming logic, race, gender, and sexuality structure romantic relations. More so, the games I analyze show the

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<sup>1</sup> Dating games are often called “dating sims,” which means dating “simulation.” Technically dating sims contain simulation elements, though sometimes fans will use the term to apply to all dating games with or without sim gameplay. In Japan, dating games are *ren'nai* games or “love” games, with various sub-categories such as *bishoujo* games (aimed at heterosexual men) and *otome* games (aimed at heterosexual women).

potential of the sub-genre to disrupt animate hierarchies between humans, animals, and things, due to their non-human dateable characters and biopolitical themes. In these games, transnational Japanese popular culture (and its circulation within Asia as well) becomes a technique for transnational fandom to work through questions about future survival. Ultimately, *Hatoful Boyfriend* and *Tusks* turn to embodied queer relations as a solution to their post-apocalyptic scenarios and emphasize the re-performance of non-normative intimacies over singular textual archives and linear temporality.



Figure 1. Example of a choice mechanic. Screenshot from *Hatoful Boyfriend* by the author.

Though this chapter does not actually take a specific anime or K-pop group on as its subject matter, it illustrates the breadth of anime's media mix in other mediums. So rather than focus *in* on an anime TV show or K-pop group, I am taking them as my starting point and focusing *out* to see how their ecologies encompass a wider section of media and fan practices. Dating games are heavily associated with Asia, because the genre originated in Japan and games usually contain Japanese pop culture tropes even if they are not explicitly set in Japan. These games—and video games overall—are an important part of anime's media ecology since “anime” is a media mix (Steinberg 2012) that constitutes a web of mediums rather than solely animated shows, as outlined in my Introduction. Games inspire anime and vice versa, and often the two are made with the expectation that they will be transmediated into one another. Dating games in particular are seen as a central part of anime subculture; media theorist Azuma Hiroki (2009) used them as the prime example to formulate his seminal theory of the “database” within post-modern otaku culture, where fans pull and remix desirable elements from a “database” of traits within pop culture, rather than following a linear narrative of one game or show. Though dating games are most closely tied to anime and therefore Japan, they are also popular throughout East Asia, and recently, the South Korean game developer Cheritz has come up as one of the more popular dating game developers (Ganzon 2018b), making the genre connected to Asia more broadly in the eyes of transnational fans. K-pop also has become a theme in more

recent dating games, with certain games containing stories about fictional K-pop idols. For example, it is telling that the forthcoming dating game parody *Boyfriend Dungeon* (2021) has a “K-pop idol” as one of its dateable characters, among the more general jobs of its other characters (such as “financier,” “club owner,” etc.), illustrating K-pop’s current impact on these games.<sup>2</sup>

More broadly, I turn to video games as a medium in this chapter because at their core, games are always about player control, agency, and complicity within larger hegemonic structures. All the chapters in this dissertation analyze the agency of media audiences, and how much power they have to disrupt national boundaries and create transnational collectives through embodied performances. In chapter one, reaction videos provided K-pop fans a way to transnationally connect, converse, and criticize K-pop and fandom – particularly around racism within their community – in a way that values immediate bodily response as a form of valid critique. Chapter Two showed how the musical *KPOP* hailed its audience to take the position of fans and identify affectively with the idols, though for Asian American audience members, the show demonstrated an all-too-familiar negotiation of transnational crossing between idol/fan, Asian/American, and the digital/physical. And in my next chapter, I will examine how the play *God Bless Baseball* questions the effectiveness of fannish, affective movement itself to break free of U.S. global media domination.

Dating game parodies slot into this configuration as a transnational fan practice that is inextricably linked to Asian global media flows and adds another dimension to the movement concept of “looping transference” that has been present throughout this dissertation. In this chapter I will examine transnational fandom movement in dating game parodies on multiple levels: the movement and representation of bodies in the games’ narratives; the movement of the player’s body through the control schema; and the sharing of these games to a wider transnational community. Importantly, dating games are structured as a loop, since they expect their players to replay them repeatedly, which finds synergy with the concept of “game loops” in video games overall. Connected to the concept of “game feel,” meaning the way it *feels in one’s body* to play the game, game loops are the repeated actions a player must execute throughout any given game. For example, Patterson (2020a) defines the repetitive, ludic patterns in first-person shooters as shoot-jump-run-reload, which players must loop over and over in ever-increasingly difficult situations and time limits in order to progress in the game. Game loops are not about the player as an agent of control, but rather focus on the player as a body in motion, as they ask the player to engage their body physically (to execute the controls). As actions, these loops are pleasurable for the player, and often become the main focus of the game. While the loops in dating games are different than those in first-person shooters, they are still embodied actions that reflect structural norms around relationships. Dating game parodies exploit and queer these loops to both expose biopolitical structures and find a way outside of them.

First, I will briefly analyze how video games as a medium are defined by questions of player control, 21<sup>st</sup>-century empire, and Asia. These conversations connect to how embodiment and player movement is central to video games, even though the medium is often considered *disembodied*. Then I will show how game scholars position dating games overall as a queer disruption of the domination of the AAA, big-budget gaming industry; however, I will also complicate this notion by discussing dating games’ underlying heteronormative structure in order

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<sup>2</sup> I would argue that dating games also stem from a longer tradition of fan-made “dating games” in the form of quizzes around anime characters and real-life K-pop idols, where fans take a quiz to figure out who they would “date” in any given anime or K-pop group.

to then demonstrate how dating game parodies queer the genre. Using *Hatoful Boyfriend* and *Tusks* as my primary case studies, I will then elaborate three ways that dating game parodies disrupt heteronormative, animate hierarchies through embodied movement and remixing of Japanese pop culture tropes. The chapter ends with a consideration of how these games look to queer loops as a means of future survival.

### **Games as control, empire, and performance**

Video games as a medium have always been defined by the complex problem of player agency. Earlier studies privileged player agency and a high level of interactivity as the defining feature of video games, setting them apart from film or TV spectatorship. Janet Murray's (1997) influential *Hamlet on the Holodeck* describes digital media and games' "satisfying power" as the player or user's ability to "to take meaningful action" and see the results of those choices (126). After all, a game will not go without player input, which suggests that games *should* be the most agential of all media forms. This promise of player agency can be seen in the rise in popularity of "open world" games, or games that present the player with a wide set of locations and systems that they can approach in multiple ways, untethered from a rigid, linear script. Christopher B. Patterson (2020a) uses the *Grand Theft Auto* series, (in)famous for the numerous nefarious activities the protagonist can engage in as a member of the criminal underworld, to illustrate the "freedom" in open world games: they are a "child's freedom from the masters of control, a freedom to reinvent and experiment within a 'magic circle' of play" (3), where anything goes. Sarah Stang (2019) argues, however, that player agency in games is an illusion, as games are pre-scripted computer programs with a limited number of options. As digital media, games make their rules, or as Alexander Galloway (2004) terms, their protocols that structure player actions, explicit. Therefore, one could argue that video games are not truly interactive, but are in fact *reactive*, as a chain of reactions between computer and player, as Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron (2008) argue. What is important to me about these conversations is not so much whether video games are definitively interactive or not, but rather that video games, industry practices, wider discourses – including those in the gaming community – are defined by a *push-and-pull* of player agency.

The conversation around control, player participation, and player complicity in larger systems extends into the wider, global network of the video game business. Wendy Chun's (2006) formation of the Internet as a coupling of control through the illusion of freedom and are inextricably linked to the logics of empire. Since the global gaming industry eclipses every other entertainment industry in revenue and reach, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg de Peuter (2013) and Patterson (2020a) argue that video games are *the* medium of 21<sup>st</sup>-century of empire. Games rely on extractive production chains (such as raw materials for hardware coming from African mines), exploitative working conditions (such as hardware production in the Pearl River Delta, where workers labor under brutal conditions), and military investment, which turns many games into either training or recruiting tools (such as *America's Army* [2002], which was used as a recruiting tool for the U.S. army). Furthermore, the AAA gaming industry is plagued by unethical labor practices within their design studios as well. In the industry, a practice known as "crunch" is prevalent particularly with big-budget games, where game designers are expected to work extremely long hours and overtime to meet unreasonable deadlines. When a studio crunches, working 12-hour+ days and sleeping at the office on the weekends is the norm, and

employees are expected to sacrifice their physical and mental wellbeing for the sake of the game (Schreier 2018, 2020; Semuels 2019; Thomsen 2021).

Moreover, I take the view that this transnational gaming ecology/network is always in relation to Asia. From production factories in Malaysia and China, to the Japanese game industry's undeniable influence in every gaming genre, the products of games are saturated with Asia, even when, as Patterson argues, the game itself is not "Asian" (2020a, 9). Games' association with Asia and Asians is broader too; not only through Techno-Orientalist assumptions that Asians are more "naturally" inclined toward technology, but through what Tara Fickle calls "ludo-Orientalism," where the design, marketing, and rhetoric of games "shape how Asians as well as East-West relations are imaged and where notions of racial hierarchies get reinforced" (2019, 3). What separates ludo-Orientalism from Techno-Orientalism is the former's specific focus on how *gaming technologies* – both digital and analog (as another stereotype about Asians is that they harbor peerless proclivities for gambling and games of chance) – are used in everyday life as a way of sense making, particularly around racial fictions. Asians (and Asian Americans) play games *too much* and are *too serious* about games, as seemingly evidenced by Asians playing *StarCraft* so much they literally die, or when Asian teams dominate the gold, silver, and bronze ranks in every eSports tournament, or even sometimes, as Fickle notes, the Olympics (Fickle 2019, 3). Asians supposed seriousness about games feeds into myths about Asians as a model minority and "playing fair." A doubled-edged sword, the assumption that Asians able to assimilate in the U.S. and economically succeed through hard work functions both as proof that structural racism does not exist and a complaint that Asians are not "playing fair" in the game called life. This is often argued through focusing in on supposed obsessive practices, like Asians playing the violin until their fingers swell (Fickle 2019, 3) or Chinese laborers farming gold in the video game *World of Warcraft* (a practice where someone amasses large amounts of in-game currency to sell it for real-world money) and using these practices as evidence that Asians are effectively ruining the "level playing field" for other players (Nakamura 2009). Gaming logics permeate racial logics, and for video games, they are always in relation to Asianness.

With games speaking to bodily control both inside narratives and through their global production chains, it is not a stretch to see how players' interactions with games function as embodied performances. While I believe that video games are their own distinct cultural form and deserve to be studied as such, rather than extensions of film or television (the mediums to which video games are most often compared), I see their lineage stemming from a combination of computational history and performance history. When defining the medium, Galloway (2006) calls games an *action*, which signals their longer, analogue history that aligns with theatrical performance practices. Takeo Rivera argues that games are a "private theater" (2014, 70) that bring players into a magic circle for a bounded period of time – essentially, every run of a game is a performance between player and game, never to repeated exactly the same. However, Rivera notes how video games blur the role of the player, as the player functions as performer (the one who enacts the drama), character (as they step into the protagonist's shoes), and audience member (as they witness and make sense of the system). However, rather than simply witnessing the performance of these rules, gamers are asked to become them—to embody the rules by carrying them out through specific actions. Similarly, James Newman has argued that the "player may not see themselves as any one particular character on the screen, but rather as the sum of every force and influence that comprises the game" (2002); essentially, as the player becomes the game, they enact and embody it on multiple levels, from the protagonist, to the controls (and

feeling the “game feel”), to wider discourses surrounding it. And as players are asked to become the game and all its varying levels of controls, many fans and designers look to how they can explicitly disrupt them.

Now I come back to visual novels and dating games as a genre. In one way, these games and their parodies might seem like the least agential due to their focus on scripted narrative, limited graphics (no “open world” playgrounds), and limited choices, which are explicitly listed for the player onscreen. Many scholars and gamers place their lineage in the vein of the novel, choose-your-own-adventure books, and hypertext novels, because the player literally reads the text of the story onscreen, though some dating games contain voiceover as well. However, I argue that dating games are one of the most interactive forms of video game, where audience participation and performance takes center stage, because of their accessibility to make, to play, and to share.

Though dating games are popular within Japan (Patterson 2020b), within the larger, global gaming industry there are a smaller percentage of them compared to other genres. However, there is a desire for dating games from their dedicated global fanbases, so in addition to mainstream games made by companies, many dating games available globally are made by independent designers or fans (i.e. people who typically do not work for a company) *for* fans of these games. And because visual novels are comparatively easy to make, with the assistance of free game engines (like Ren’py, an engine designed to make visual novels) and open platforms for distribution (like Itch.io, where the “choose your own price” model dominates), indie designers and fans have access to making them. In other words, dating games are always made in relation to their fanbase because the fanbase is driving the sales and desire for the games. That is why, in one way, it is difficult to separate designer from fan when looking at indie dating games; many make dating games because they themselves are fans of the genre.

Anastasia Salter et al. (2018) call visual novels a “cheap, personal, and democratized” game making model that is not subject to the expectations of gatekeepers on other distribution platforms (like Steam) or perform in a crowded marketplace (4), emphasizing how they both allow for greater expression of individual stories and are highly collaborative. Additionally, Stang (2019) argues that audience feedback is one way that players can truly have agency within the video game industry, and visual novels form a genre that particularly thrives on a collaborative creative process. Since many independent designers make these games in their spare time, they often get audience feedback during their development process, uploading parts of the game or revisions over time, creating a feedback loop between designers and audience. For example, *Hatoful Boyfriend’s* creator went so far as to work with a fan on the first English-language translation of the game; translator Nazerine had done a fan translation of the game’s initial demo, which caught Hato Moe’s attention. She then collaborated with them on the game’s full English localization, retaining many of the jokes the translator added into the game. *Hatoful Boyfriend*, then, like many dating games, is the product of a back-and-forth between creator and fan. After games are released, fans will also stream or upload videos of themselves playing dating games, often narrating and playing all the characters themselves, literally performing the games. Through sharing, they show how the act of gaming has become a performance worthy of witnessing, extending beyond Rivera’s theater of the personal. I should note that streaming is a popular practice within all game genres, but added to the already collaborative, fannish nature of dating games, takes on extra weight as a way the community asserts their performance as fans of these games.

## Are Dating Games Queer?

In broader game studies, scholars such as Bonnie Ruberg, Adrienne Shaw, Edmond Chang, and Derek Burrill marry queer theory with games to point to the synergy between the two, which is the “longing to imagine alternative ways of being” (Ruberg 2019, 1) and to resist normative structures through pleasure and play. Games do not have to have queer representation to be queer, and many queer games scholars emphasize how the idea of *playing queerly* – in ways that question or expose or disrupt normative power structures – is a transformative practice. That is not to say that every game is resistive or queer; as mentioned, many serve to bolster militaristic, extractive, and dominative industries and desires, and even those games with queer representation can also reinforce heteronormative relationship structures or unquestioningly reproduce dominant production chains of empire within the big budget, AAA game industry. That said, there is also a wealth of indie games that actively work to resist the industry’s association with empire in myriad ways, and often indie visual novels and dating games are seen as a genre that has more queer representation and stories. In fact, indie visual novels are so linked to queer narratives that Patterson (2020b) points out that fans often complain that visual novels are the *only* style of game that enjoys wider queer representation.

However, dating games also have a complicated history in relation to queerness, particularly within the mainstream industry. Japanese pop culture scholars often point to the ways that mainstream dating games reinforce heteronormativity and stereotypical gender roles. One way is through the dominance of heterosexual representation in dating game narratives. In Japan, dating game sub-genres usually target an assumed audience, mainly heterosexual men (with games called *bishōjo* games) or heterosexual women (with games called *otome* games) and these target audiences carry over when a game is localized for global distribution. The dateable characters are also almost exclusively straight, with few representations of LGBTQ+ characters and experiences.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, a significant amount of dating games reproduce traditional gender roles in romantic relationships. Through studies of several dating games in Japan and Korea, Sarah Christina Ganson (2018a, 2018b, 2019) shows the ways many *otome* games formulate the female protagonist's primary role as a "carer" for the men in their lives, and in return, the male characters turn into protectors for the protagonist. Leticia Andlauer describes the traditional *otome* heroine as pure, sweet, kind, and having a “fragile aspect” (2018, 172), and Emily Taylor (2007) also analyzes the ways the dateable women in *bishōjo* games eventually become dependent on male protagonists over the course of the narratives.

However, Patterson (2020b) and Anastasia Salter et al. (2018) argue that indie designers often respond to this lack of representational diversity and strive to incorporate diverse genders, sexualities, and races in their games. For example, the game *Arcade Spirits* (2019) created by Fiction Factory Games illustrates a trend in independent dating games to offer more in-depth player choice; the player can choose their appearance, gender, pronouns, and the level of romance they want in the game, in addition to the game’s romance options spanning a range of genders, sexualities, and ethnicities. Ganson (2018b) has also noted the power that fans have to lobby for more diverse dating options in dating games. One example she cites is when fans of Cheritz’s games asked the company for more inclusive representation (via Tumblr), which

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<sup>3</sup> There are *yuri* (girls’ love) and *yaoi* or Boys’ Love (BL) games as well. However, it is important to understand that *yuri* and *yaoi* are part of larger media genres in Japan, and these media cannot be presumed to be made by queer creators, for a queer community. See Friedman (2017) and Wood (2013) for discussions around the complexities of sexual representation in *yuri* and *yaoi*.

resulted in a female dateable character in their popular *otome* mobile game, *Mystic Messenger* (2016). These are both examples of ways fans and game designers push back against common dating game narratives and demand more representational diversity within their games.

It is also not a forgone conclusion that dating games produced by gaming companies are *only* heteronormative, and even if they promote heteronormativity in one way, they can also contain narratives, mechanics, and platforms that complicate it in another. The overall structure of a dating game encourages the player to replay the game to see all possible endings with all possible partners, and in some cases, when a player collects all the endings, they receive the power to unlock a secret ending scene, whole new ending route, or special pictures of the characters. Leticia Andlauer (2018) sees this repeated looping of the game and exploration of other romantic partners – including the “infidelity” of having multiple favorite characters and the way fans collect merchandise surrounding these games – as a form of gameplay that disrupts normative heterosexual assumptions that the male partner is usually the unfaithful one. Though the narrative in dating games usually focuses on one partner at a time (and therefore reinforces monogamy), Andlauer argues that from the player’s point of view, the supposedly “meek” female main character can have multiple partners. Kazumi Hasegawa (2013) takes the concept of history and repeated narrative in *otome* games a step further and argues that *otome* games with historical narratives offer female players the opportunity to assert their presence in historical narratives that often exclude them, effectively “queering history.” And as noted, Salter et al. (2018) see the creation and distribution of indie visual novels on alternative platforms as a form of queer game making, disrupting Western-centric logics of AAA game design that rely on big budgets, corporate-approved storylines, and game stores that only list certain kinds of games.

I should note that Patterson (2020b) rightly cautions reading queerness into dating games, since the genre is so closely associated with Asia, particularly Japan. In his study, he analyzes several examples where non-Asian designers set their games within Asia or designed characters that are visually coded in anime-style and use anime tropes (and therefore are “Asiatic” – coded as Asian) to create queer worlds. This practice can potentially project a Western-centric, Orientalist gaze onto the Asian characters, where Asians automatically equal “queer” in the eyes of the non-Asian (often white) designer. Patterson emphasizes that within Asia, visual novels and their tropes are not seen as queer, unless they explicitly contain LGBTQ+ characters and storylines.

However, I view dating games as largely promoting hegemonic heteronormativity through the idea that romance and sex are a reward or “winnable.” The point of dating games is to “win” a particular partner and get what is termed their “good” ending, which usually means a happy, monogamous relationship. All choices and strategy go toward completing that objective by “reading” character archetypes types to discern what responses will yield the best results. If a player fails, they will get the “bad” ending (usually without a romance or even resulting in a character death) or the story may stop early if the player chooses too many wrong options. This rigid structuring means that the only option for the player is to fall in line, so to speak, and choose whatever the game deems the “correct” option, often along gendered lines. And if there is a simulation element, romance turns into a form of time management and productivity, because the player has to efficiently raise their stats to the appropriate level in a certain amount of time.

The common “readable” archetypes found in dating games mostly come from Japanese popular culture. For example, there is often a *tsundere* character, someone who is initially cold or even hostile to the protagonist, but over time reveals a softer side. Other common tropes are *yandere* (someone who is “lovesick,” but to a dangerous, obsessive degree), the *genki* or

energetic character, and the shy, quiet bookworm, though there are many more. The use of such set character archetypes can underscore the heteronormative structure in dating games, because while the tropes can be deciphered visually, they are also performative and read through the way the characters act and speak. In turn, the player enacts socialized, normative dating habits when playing the game as they try and successfully romance these set character types. Patterson (2020b) analyzes these tropes through Azuma Hiroki's (2009) famous concept of the database, where fans no longer interact with overarching narratives, but rather focus on database elements that they can pick and choose: "The archetypes thus don't function as characters to identify with in a narrative (empowering representations), but as sprites that contain intertextual erotic elements [...] that are contained in various online databases" (2020b). Essentially, the characters in visual novels are made up of desirable elements (called *moe* elements)<sup>4</sup> that are both visual and behavioral, and can be broken down into component parts, catalogued, and "gamed."

Dating game *parodies*, then, play with and subvert typical dating game structure, performing what Bonnie Ruberg (2019) calls "re-gamification," or the practice of visualizing the unspoken rules that shape expectations for gender and sexuality. For Ruberg, re-gamification is a key element of queer game design because queer game design not only resists hegemony but also works to *expose* it (126). And though parody is not required for re-gamification, I do see synergy between queer game design and parody. For film scholar Robert Stam, parody's most important aspect is its dissociation from the past and seemingly-set conventions, highlighting "art's historicity, its contingency and transience" (1992, 135). Parodies therefore disrupt their object to expose its historical contexts, question its stability, and open toward transforming conventions. What is important here to emphasize is that a parody does not need to be *funny* to the point that it is one, big non-stop joke; rather, through exaggeration it needs to question its own conventions. Not all games I cite in this essay are "funny" – most end up quite serious and earnest – but they all play with dating game structure to reveal how both narrative and mechanics participate in the construction of gender, sexuality, and intimate relations, and conversely the ways that dating and relationships are game-like. More broadly, dating game parodies restructure *who* or *what* is desirable, exposing the various queer intimacies we already have. My purpose isn't to claim that the entire dating game genre is "queer," but rather to explore the ways that independent designers and fans find the genre productive for exploring queer experiences through parody, and to show how dating game parodies have become a transnational, queer game design practice.

### Of Birds and Orcs: Queering Dateable Characters

One of the primary ways parodies queer dating games is through upending player expectations with seemingly absurd dating options, drawing attention to embodied relations within the game world. In this section, I will focus on the representation of dateable characters within the *Hatoful Boyfriend's* and *Tusks'* story worlds and the different narrative levels on which they queer embodied, intimate relations. Far from being a fun punchline, these unexpected dateable characters draw attention to how race and nationality structure romantic relations, and also blur the line between the human body and non-human body.

In *Hatoful Boyfriend*, all the player's dating partners are pigeons from a fictional, Japanese high school called St. PigeoNation. The protagonist is a human girl named Hiyoko

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<sup>4</sup> *Moe* (萌え), is a Japanese word that describes strong, affectionate, and protective feelings toward a fictional character in anime, manga, video games, etc. Characters that elicit these feelings are *moe* characters, and elements that might be particularly attractive are *moe* elements.

(though the player can choose their own name as well), who is the only human student at the school. In *Hatoful Boyfriend's* fiction, a variant of the H5N1 virus (the “bird flu”) has wiped out most of humankind. Human governments tried to spread a counter-virus to the dangerous birds, but instead it resulted in birds gaining human-level intelligence and becoming the dominant lifeforms on the planet. So, in addition to the silliness of dating pigeons, *Hatoful Boyfriend's* story is saturated with a larger conflict between birds and humans in a post-pandemic world. This storyline does not come to a full resolution until the player unlocks the last ending, but the anxiety of biopolitics always hovers in the background.

In one way, *Hatoful Boyfriend* falls into the broader lineage of animal-centric games. Specifically, I connect it to Marco Caracciolo's (2021) conception of “animal mayhem games.” Animal mayhem games are games that feature an animal avatar that deliberately hinders human activities. A prime example of this sub-category is *Untitled Goose Game* (2019), where the player controls a goose character and completes objectives that largely upset the humans around town. Unlike games that purport to provide an authentic “animal experience” for a human player, which reinforce Western philosophical notions of human dominance over animals and nature, animal mayhem games do not allow the player full control over the animal avatar and instead disorient them and take on a nonhuman-oriented view of the world. Though in *Hatoful Boyfriend* the player does not control a pigeon character until the very last route, the player must constantly consider pigeons as legitimate, attractive, dateable partners, which disrupts notions of anthropocentric hierarchies.

In talking about animal figures, queer theorist Mel Y. Chen (2012, 103) illuminates how symbolically, animals can *become* sexuality. Humans often use animal figures to represent “our” more animalistic sides and it is not uncommon for certain animals to represent sex in general, which indicates how blurry and permeable the line between human animal and non-human animal already is. However, *Hatoful Boyfriend* still pushes expectations further because pigeons are historically not considered the most erotic of animals in humans' imaginations. Though there are no explicit sex scenes in the game or even kissing, it is apparent through some tongue-in-cheek commentary that the protagonist *does* find the birds attractive, despite never elaborating how a human-pigeon physical relationship would actually work. For example, in a scene at the school pool the protagonist thinks upon seeing the birds splashing around: “All these damp, tight-clinging feathers are making my heart race...” This human-pigeon relationship, where the attractive pigeons are just as smart (or even smarter) than the human protagonist, upends human/animal difference. For Chen, without this difference firmly in place, “the audience is provoked into the multiplicity of possible encounters of self and other,” and there is the possibility that borders between human and animal, self and other, dissolve completely (146). When dating game parodies choose non-human dating partners, they indicate the instability of animate boundaries, thus causing the player to consider what non-normative, surprising intimacies they form, and the (in)stability of their own body.

Besides making the player consider pigeons as objects of desire, having the player consider the way bird intimacy would work in *Hatoful Boyfriend's* universe throws into stark relief the absurdity of bodies and embodiment in this world and begins to set up the queer embodiment that takes place in the last route of the game. Hiyoko is fully human. The birds, though intelligent, still are pigeon-sized. They often comment on their inability to do things like lift heavy books or note Hiyoko's strength.<sup>5</sup> But if one tries to push this fiction further – for

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<sup>5</sup> In a way, Hiyoko becomes coded as more “animalistic” due to her physical prowess; she lives in a cave, craves meat, and goes on long daily runs.

example, are the desks in the school human-sized or pigeon-sized? Are all the birds running around in absurdly large buildings or is Hiyoko magically cramming herself into bird-sized abodes? – it becomes a strange exercise in reconsidering basic bodily proportion in this world. Though the game does not have any gameplay that controls the protagonist’s body, it calls into question normative modes of embodiment because it does not try to hide or explain any anomalies that may pop up when considering the workings of human body-to-pigeon body intimacy in this game.

It is worth noting that in the game, the birds’ gender and sexuality falls more toward heteronormative, as nearly all the dateable birds are gendered male. The one dateable female bird is treated more like a fun side quest, as she is not a main character and has a rather short route. There is also an option to turn on “human portraits” for the main pigeons. These portraits appear one time when the characters are introduced, fading in behind their pigeon counterparts almost like a specter. In one way, this can be viewed as an anthropomorphizing of the pigeons, that they need to be viewed as “humanlike” to be considered fully desirable and not *too* improper according to normative expectations. The portraits also serve to indicate the character’s archetype. However, one pigeon, Okosan, does not have a human portrait; his introduction portrait is just a picture of a pigeon in a high school uniform (see Figure 2). I read the easy slippage between pigeon portrait and human portrait in the game as an indication of the unstable boundaries between human and animal, a refusal to consider them as either/or, but always both.



Figure 2 A comparison of a human portrait and pigeon portrait in *Hatoful Boyfriend*. Screenshots by author.

*Hatoful Boyfriend*’s bird characters also challenge the human/animal divide through its post-apocalyptic storyline, where animate hierarchies have been flipped somewhat—the animal birds are at the top of the hierarchy, with humans under them. Like all post-apocalyptic stories, *Hatoful Boyfriend* functions as a proposal of what could be, which stems from our current environment. Caracciolo (2021) and Alenda Y. Chang (2018) connect the importance of games that focus on animals or things (non-living matter) to our current ecological crisis, and how they challenge the supposed separation between humans (civilization) and animals (wilderness). Games like *Untitled Goose Game* serve as an “imaginary retaliation” (Caracciolo 2021) against humans’ catastrophic effects on the environment. For *Hatoful Boyfriend*, the various abandoned and crumbling buildings littered in the background pictures serve as a trace of humans’ physical presence, as they are found wherever the protagonist goes—even as she runs through the countryside—and are a stark reminder of humans’ current ecological impact. The birds’ use of these supposedly human-only spaces also gestures toward the ways we (humans) are not separate from the environment. Through their subversion, Caracciolo argues that these games highlight the limitations of thinking of environmental issues solely from a human-centric perspective and

makes us (humans) consider the ways we are already linked to and deteriorating the environment.

I would like to note that for many studies on animal games, there still seems to be a distinct separation between the human animal and non-human animal that assumes we will all recognize humans *as* humans, no matter their racial or ethnic group, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. *Hatoful Boyfriend*, however, points to how race, sexuality, nationality, and animality are *already* connected and intertwined in animate hierarchies, and how this slippage between human animals and non-human animals shifts depending on *which* people we are talking about. Rather than strictly being an “animal game,” I see *Hatoful Boyfriend* falling more in line with Chen’s (2012) argument that animacy – the quality of agency, awareness, and liveness – is central to biopolitical orderings of life and that nationality, race, sexuality, ability, and animality, among other things, contribute to conceptions of who or what is more “animate” or “human.”

The stability of the human body is called into question through the pandemic storyline in *Hatoful Boyfriend*, which points to the complex intersections of race and sexuality within animate hierarchies. People often racialize animal figures to symbolize and oppress certain groups of people; in one example, Chen (2012) analyzes 19<sup>th</sup>-century newspaper cartoons that associate Chinese Americans with a variety of animals, including rats, discursively *lowering* their place on the animate scale and classifying them as subhumans. For *Hatoful Boyfriend*, it is important to remember that the game was made by a Japanese designer, and therefore draws from a different cultural context than a U.S.-based one, where different animals could carry different racial connotations. However, the game has been distributed globally and therefore, its narrative has been spread and interpreted by a global audience. The game’s pandemic setting recalls the ways that viruses become nationalized and racialized, and the xenophobic incidents that happen during disease outbreaks. In the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not a stretch to see how a disease becomes racialized, given the rise of anti-Asian and anti-Chinese sentiment around the world, including within other Asian countries (Rich 2020). Chen notes other outbreaks – SARS and, apropos for *Hatoful Boyfriend*, bird flu – that were perceived as “Asian” biosecurity threats in the United States (2012, 171). Though designer Hato Moa has not talked about the bird flu in relation to Asia in *Hatoful Boyfriend*, the game’s storyline about disease control highlights this association between birds and disease, and how in many parts of the world, bird flu was racialized as “Asian.” In this way, the game is not only about who is desirable, but who is considered dangerous and a threat to porous, bodily boundaries.

Xenophobia is also present in the game through the pigeons’ prejudice. Much of the prejudice expressed is based on class, as some pigeons are wealthy and some are not, and some of the prejudice is based on ability, as some of the pigeons say derisive things to Okosan, who cannot speak as well as the others (and is therefore viewed as less intelligent— notable, considering Okosan is the only pigeon without a human portrait). However, one dateable bird, named Anghel (the Tagalog word for “angel”), hails from the Philippines and one of the more elitist birds, Sakuya, disparages him, calling him a peasant, and tells him to “bang some coconuts together.” Sakuya himself is half-French, which is a common character trope in anime and manga, usually used to signal that a character is romantic and cosmopolitan, able to navigate both cultures seamlessly. However, in this instance, Sakuya’s prejudice indicates a longer, violent history between Japan and the Philippines, one where the power dynamics between occupier and occupied still exist in *Hatoful Boyfriend’s* post-apocalyptic future.<sup>6</sup> Even the

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<sup>6</sup> Anghel is also obsessed with a particular in-universe role-playing game, which subtly gestures to the transnational flow of Japanese popular culture throughout Asia.

protagonist Hiyoko is not immune to viewing Anghel in a colonial frame, as she says she has the strange urge to call him “banana man.” Her tone is not malicious, but rather illustrates how pervasive these animate structures are and how they strangely take hold, reducing Anghel’s humanity (bird-ity?) down to a thing or banana, similar to Chen’s example of Chinese Americans being lowered on the animate scale. Rather than treating all birds as equal or interchangeable, *Hatoful Boyfriend* does not shy away from the language that makes certain “people” more or less human, whether it draws them closer to animals (Okosan is the most “birdlike,” for example) or even things (“coconuts”), and through its romance premise questions why one bird would be more attractive over the other.

*Tusks: The Orc Dating Sim* provides a different model to see how “unexpected” dateable characters subvert expectations around who or what is desirable, but one that is still connected to race, otherness, and biopolitics. In *Tusks*, the player’s romantic options are all male orcs (and one human man), and the protagonist is also a male orc. The game is set in a pseudo-mythical, medieval Scotland, and all the characters are travelling north together from an annual orcish assembly. Though the game is ostensibly set in the past, the orc characters are facing their own apocalypse of sorts. Throughout the 14 days it takes the party to reach their destination, the group must negotiate how to traverse across human lands that are growing more and more hostile toward them. For example, at one point in the game the group runs into a literal human-built wall meant to keep them off the land, drawing themes of biopolitics into the game world, similar to *Hatoful Boyfriend*. Though the game itself is quite earnest and gentle, I consider it a parody for a couple reasons. First, Alexander titled *Tusks: The Orc Dating Sim* in a way that replicates similar titles in within the dating game parody sub-genre (such as *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Sim* or *I Love You Colonel Sanders! A Finger Lickin’ Good Dating Simulator*), which frames the game within that sub-genre, rather than dating games as a whole. Reviewers and fans reacted in surprise to the title and initial premise much in the same way as *Hatoful Boyfriend*, because of the unexpectedness of dating orcs, which are normally the violent, inherently evil archetype in the Western fantasy genre. And secondly, *Tusks* subverts dating game mechanics like many other parodies, drawing attention to the genre’s structuring of dating through animate hierarchies.

In a 2015 interview with *Vice*, designer Mitch Alexander said he specifically chose orcs because of their perpetual status as “outsiders” and inherently evil creatures within the fantasy genre. Alexander points out that orcs are always described in non-white racial codes and considered the lowest of “races” (humans, elves, dwarves, orcs, etc.) in the fantasy genre. Takeo Rivera (2017) notes that depictions of orcs in Western fantasy represent a “culmination of masculine chaos and barbarity, coded variously as Hun, Mongol, Islamic, and Black; they are characterized by their massive muscles, warrior culture, protruding canine teeth, green skin, tribal political organization, and, of course, bloodlust” (199). Orcs are not simply “non-white,” but a “barbaric” and supposedly dangerous amalgamation of races, shifting between stereotypes of Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries. Particularly, within J.R.R. Tolkien’s influential *Lord of the Rings* series, orcs are coded as Mongol stereotypes (Tolkien 1958, cited in Carpenter 2000, 293) and their further depictions of them in Peter Jackson’s movie trilogy (2001-2003) have been compared to racist caricatures of Japanese people during World War II (Ibata 2003), linking orcs to racist stereotypes of Asians as invading hordes that have been prevalent in Europe since the Middle Ages. Alexander (2015) also saw how orcs depictions *othered* them in other ways, connoting “ableism, misogyny, homophobia, cissexism, and classism” in one big bundle. Therefore, the ridiculousness of the game’s premise comes not only from dating a monster, but

from dating an always already racialized and othered monster who represents the lowest of life forms.

Even more so than *Hatoful Boyfriend*, *Tusks* does not shy away from sex or intimacy in the game, though the player can choose to turn off adult content. If one does not turn adult content off and successfully romances a partner, there will be times where the character sprites are naked and there will be textual descriptions intimate acts such as cuddling and the beginnings of sexual acts (though there are no depictions of pornographic content in the game). However, rather than treating these graphics like a “reward” at the end of a single route like many mainstream dating games do, these scenes come at different points during the 14-day journey. A player could also experience multiple moments like these with different orcs throughout a playthrough or become involved in a polyamorous relationship with the group’s three chiefs. The narrative treats these scenes more as acts of closeness and relationship growth rather than objectification, and the ability to partner with multiple characters during the course of the game, without the promise of a heteronormative, monogamous pairing at the end, focuses on how non-normative intimacies can build community and found family. The visuals of the orcs’ bodies and descriptions of queer intimacy also work to subvert what bodies are considered desirable, as many reviewers have appreciated the variety of body types within the orc depictions.

Due to the unavoidability of orcs as other, the orcs in *Tusks* are not quite racially ambiguous. Patterson (2020b) lists racial ambiguity as one issue that can crop up in English-language visual novels, where the characters are decidedly non-white, but where their race is not identified nor discussed. Racial ambiguity of non-white characters can be a way to represent a wide variety of people who have been shut out of representation in gaming, but it also reduces race to visuals, instead of recognizing that race is attached to history, culture, and power dynamics. In one way, the orcs’ race in *Tusks* is “ambiguous” in the sense that orcs simply represent any non-white race. However, instead of trying to erase the orcs’ personal and cultural histories, the whole crux of the game’s story revolves around learning the orcs’ different cultures and experiences of otherness, as all of them somehow feel like outsiders, from the literal fish-out-of-water selkie (a shapeshifting human/seal creature from Norse and Celtic mythology), to the orc scholar trying to live in a human city, to one orc dealing with mental illness. And for the one (seemingly white) human character, his story is about learning to be a better ally. For example, many of his conversations involve him making assumptions about orcs, such as assuming they are less “civilized” than humans. Much like *Hatoful Boyfriend*, *Tusks* makes the player confront the intersecting ways people are made less “human” through performative actions like speech acts, but by spending so much time on experiences of otherness perhaps takes the issue a step further by having them try and navigate these conversations (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 A conversation in *Tusks* between human and orc. Screenshot by author.

## Choice and Unhappy Endings

Another way dating game parodies queer their format is through play with the choice mechanic. However, the narrative-heavy nature of dating games makes it difficult to separate the choice mechanic out from how it affects the story. Therefore, the technique of subverting the choice mechanic often goes together with upending archetypal character tropes and standard romance narrative “happy endings” or in the dating game vernacular, the “good” endings. Subverting the choice mechanic and narrative satisfaction also disrupts the pleasure of the particular game loop within dating games, effectively queering the loop and asking what *other* pleasures might be derived from these games than standard, heteronormative pairings.

In dating games each dateable character typically represents a recognizable archetype, largely stemming from anime-related media. Examples of these tropes are what are called *dere* types, such as *tsundere*, *yandere*, *dere* (a sweet, kind character who is unabashedly in love with the protagonist), and many more. These tropes have overlap with other romance media but have become recognizable character types within anime that fans recognize and remix in their own works. It is common for dating games parodies to riff on these character types and typical narrative tropes to expose how ridiculous, and even harmful, some of them are. *Hatoful Boyfriend* plays on these tropes by giving the player unexpected endings, no matter how “successful” they are at romancing. The happiest ending, the “true” ending, only unlocks when all options have been romanced and the game turns into more a sci-fi murder mystery than dating game, eschewing dating mechanics all together. Until then, most of the individual bird endings

are melancholic, uncertain, or unsettling. For example, if the player successfully romances their kind best friend Ryouta, the ending has a melancholic tinge because Ryouta worries about the difference between their life spans. Shy, bookish Nageki turns out to be a literal ghost and fades away. And if the player romances Shuu, who represents the *yandere* archetype, no matter what, Shuu always kills the protagonist and retains her brain. In his “good” ending, Shuu commits suicide, but only after he gets confirmation from Hiyoko’s brain that she had feelings for him. (The player’s choices here are “Yes,” “Yes,” and “Yes,” revealing how little control the player actually has.) The unsettling pigeon endings, particularly the one with Shuu, critique unhealthy dating game tropes since the most toxic character trope – the *yandere* – cannot bring the player happiness and only reveals how controlling and dangerous it is.

Breaking down familiar tropes is part of what makes dating game parodies fannish performance, and many fans use parodies to work through or critique what they consider problematic elements in media they otherwise love. For example, Dan Salvato’s cult-hit *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017, *DDLC* from here on) is a dark satire of *bishōjo* dating games and wider anime culture that critiques the “cute girls doing cute things” trope, which is essentially when there is a group of cute, infantilized anime girls who are more *moe* tropes (Azuma’s database elements) than fully realized characters, doing attractive activities like singing, dancing, baking, or otherwise “cute” activities. *DDLC* begins as a typical dating game, set in a Japanese high school, where the male protagonist joins the school’s literature club. All the other literature club members are “cute girls” and recognizable anime archetypes, but soon the game veers into the horror genre as terrible things begin to happen to the dateable characters, eventually ending with their character files being deleted from the game. It becomes clear that one character—Monika—is a self-aware computer program and controls the game in order to get the protagonist to love her; in essence, she is the *yandere* trope in computer program form. In a 2017 interview with *Kotaku*, Salvato described his relationship with anime as “love/hate,” where, as a fan, he understands the positive, fannish feelings around the cute girls trope, but also sees it as a detriment, and that it was that struggle he has as a fan that inspired the game.

However, it matters *who* is creating these games and how Asian characters function within their story. Patterson (2020b) complicates the play with archetypes within visual novels, because of their constant association with the Asiatic, and how it can quickly turn into a fetishization of Asian characters. He analyzes *DDLC*, pointing out how the game’s Asian female characters die in various horrible ways or are otherwise traumatized, and are ultimately revealed to be nothing more than computer programs. Patterson’s reading shows how the game productively exposes the characters’ “erotic excesses” through drawing attention to the fact that they are a combination of database elements, but also how this reduces Asian women characters to technological elements with tragic endings, like a group of techno-Orientalist *Madame Butterfly(s)*.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in another more light-hearted parody, Game Grumps’ *Dream Daddy: A Dad-Dating Simulator*, the player can choose what their avatar looks like. Most of the options straightforwardly describe the style of hair, nose, mouth, etc., one can choose. However, there are also the “space warrior” hair and eyes, which makes the character look like Goku, from the anime *DragonBall Z*. There are also “big *shōjo* eyes,” which gives their character big, sparkly anime eyes. In this character-building function, the game both acknowledges (and maybe even fannishly homages) the influence of Japanese pop culture on the dating game genre, but also

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<sup>7</sup> In the “good” ending, the game’s characters tearfully thank the male protagonist for supporting them and assure him that even though they’re parting ways (because they are computer programs and the game is over), they all love him.

views these Asiatic traits as aesthetic database elements. I should note that *Dream Daddy* does include Asian American “Gym Dad” Craig Cahn as a dateable option, who avoids some of the more pervasive stereotypes of Asian American men as small, nerdy, and techie. However, Craig’s race does not factor into his story in the sense that he does not talk about his experiences as an Asian American man, so while representationally inclusive, the Asiatic remains either a funny reference or silent background information in the game. Importantly, both *DDLC* and *Dream Daddy* were developed by non-Asian developers for English-speaking audiences. While the games queer dating game archetypes and promote non-normative intimacies (with either the computer program in *DDLC* or gay characters in *Dream Daddy*), they also reinforce techno-Orientalist tropes, showing how race and the Asiatic can simultaneously critique heteronormativity and reify racial power structures.

Subverting narrative archetypes and “happy endings” is closely related to disrupting dating game mechanics as well and dating game parodies often critique player agency within dating game structure. Dating games’ main mechanic is the choice mechanic, where players choose between dialogue options or actions to advance the story. What the player chooses affects the storyline, which gives the feeling of player agency. Contrary to the mechanics, however, dating games essentially promise happily-ever-afters, *as long as the player performs all the actions correctly*. If a player wants the “good” endings, they need to choose a specific set of options, meaning that there is no real choice. Many dating game parodies poke fun at this contradiction by taking away player agency or romantic endings all together, such as in the aforementioned Shuu ending in *Hatoful Boyfriend* with the choices “yes,” “yes,” or “yes.” For example, saturn’s *Worst Dating Sim* (2018) has 69 bad endings and one good ending. If the player chooses *any* wrong option at any point, the protagonist is immediately and unceremoniously punched in the face and the player must start over because the game has no save function. Besides potentially frustrating players, *Worst Dating Sim* cuts away any illusion of player choice, acknowledging that the “good” ending is on one set path. In short, many dating game parodies play with the choice mechanic by taking it *away* from the player to point out the hypocrisies within the style of game.

This subversion, however, also disrupts the player’s embodied experiences of the games, dislodging them from the heteronormative logic of mainstream dating games. Patterson (2020a) views players’ embodied actions within video games through “game loops,” which are the literal set actions a player must perform in order to complete the game. For example, Patterson focuses on the loop in first-person shooters of jump-run-aim-shoot-repeat (199), a complex choreography of button pressing and analog stick motions the player must repeatedly perform these actions within a series of timed loops that comprise the game; a single three-second loop is repeated and builds into thirty seconds, which is folded into three-minutes’ worth of a section, and so on. Importantly, these loops are directly tied to the embodied, material realities of playing a video game and are one of the primary loci of pleasure for the player. Patterson argues that game loops focus on the player as a body in motion, both in the game, but mostly through the repeated hand/eye/body movements that form pleasurable sensations, such as “rapid button presses, gameplay loops, controller rotations, the movement of the eyes from controller or keyboard to visual image, the turning of the body” (199). Game loops are also tied to the industry term “game feel,” which means the way it feels to physically execute the actions. If the game controls and game loops *feel good*, then the player is able to get into a state of “flow,” executing the actions without thinking, streaming through the game on a series of choreographic loops. For many

designers and gamers, it is the mechanical loops, rather than the narrative, which often defines the pleasures of a gaming genre.

However, while many players and game theorists consider “loops” in the realm of mechanics, and therefore not connected to the narrative, loops not only reflect a game’s ideology, but also works in tandem with it. What I mean by this is that the pleasure derived from the game loops directly affects the ideology in the game’s narrative. In Patterson’s example with the *Far Cry* series (first-person shooter games that share the general premise of some sort of American male protagonist going into foreign locales to take down a despot, crime lord, or otherwise criminal enterprise), the erotic pleasure and fast-paced rhythm of the game loops illustrate what foreign intervention implicitly promises, which is “pleasure-inducing experiences of rescue, travel, sex, and knowledge about the other” (199). Dating games have a different kind of loop than first-person shooters, but one that is still pleasurable and underscores a heteronormative, “productive” progression through the game. Broadly, dating game loops could be defined as “click, read, choose” as those are the main actions the players take throughout the game. But restarting the game and finding all the narrative paths is a second, larger, and perhaps more important loop within the structure of these games. In this case the loop turns into “fast forward, choose, read” because most dating games have the option to skip (“fast forward”) any narrative text. Dating games loops are like a combination of a treasure hunt and a sprint, as the player speeds through previously-viewed scenes, only to come to an abrupt stop when new text appears. The pleasure had in these loops, therefore, is a rhythm of exhilarating forward movement and slow(er) exploration as one finds a new partner and masters their story. With each new branch found, players often receive rewards, such as unlocking special game content. Romance and pleasure, then, in a typical dating game, are framed as something to collect and win, which is tied to the bodily sensation of unfettered forward movement.

Not all dating game parodies queer this sense of bodily movement within the game mechanics. *Hatoful Boyfriend*, for example, largely adheres to it. While the unsatisfying endings may entice the player to try and get the “true” (final) ending, the propulsion and ability to fast forward seamlessly through the game work to pull the player along, providing the same kinetic pleasure of other dating games. Sometimes, however, this forward motion is interrupted in dating game parodies, forcing the player to “play” the romance differently. In another independent dating game parody, *Date (almost) Anything Simulator* (2017) by huegor, none of the romance options with the named, archetypal human characters can end in romance, and any time the player attempts to start a romance with them, the game abruptly ends, cutting off the game loop and frustrating any typical happy ending. What this does, however, is slow the player down so that they look elsewhere within the game and rethink what choices they make. In turn, more dateable/romance options appear, including with a person in the background (the background is a static photograph, and this person is largely blurry, so there is no indication they were a choice to begin with), the computer UI, the author of the game, or the protagonist (i.e. yourself). By interrupting the flow of the typical game loop and slowing down the way the player interacts with the game, *Date (almost) Anything Simulator* draws the player’s attention to other intimate possibilities that can give them more (or a different) kind of fulfillment than romance with character tropes.

Slowing down game play is prevalent in *Tusks* as well, but not through disrupting the loop or limiting choice, but rather adding choice that emphasizes its queer themes through the setting called “NPC autonomy.” This means at key moments in the game, the non-player characters will vote on a decision or make their own choices, instead of automatically agreeing to

whatever the player decides. For example, at the beginning of the game the player proposes a name for their travelling orc group. If NPC autonomy is turned on, the other members of the group will vote on the name, and it could be rejected. Additionally, at the end of each day, the player has the option to try and spend time with certain orcs at the campsite. The orcs can refuse to spend time with the player, and that decision is not tied to the status of their relationship. A player could experience an intimate scene with an orc one night, and the next the orc could refuse for various other reasons, like being tired. Refusals like this interrupt the dominant heteronormative logic of dating games, which rewards players with characters' time if they perform the correct actions. Additionally, a player can have intimate relationships with numerous orcs over the course of the game, or become part of a polyamorous relationship, which disrupts prevailing "happy end" monogamy in most dating games, including parodies. And though the player still moves the story along through clicking their mouse or controller, they must give up on the idea of control and dominance as the other characters take their time to decide and offer their "own" opinions. Instead of turning relationships into a set of objectives to complete, *Tusks*' NPC autonomy function reframes dating as something a person cannot simply "game," but rather an activity that requires patience, consideration, and consent. The NPC autonomy thus resists the colonial themes surrounding its narrative, as the player must engage the racialized and marginalized orcs on their own terms and cannot "master" them. *Tusks* not only asks what it would be like if a *video game character* did not always do what the player wanted, but disrupts many games' underlying colonial logics by having the marginalized subject reject player dominance and become more animate in the process.

### Queer Endings, Queer Loops

Lastly, I would like to talk about how *Hatoful Boyfriend* and *Tusks* make commentary on biopolitics and time, and how they both ultimately shun the neoliberal progress of time and turn to a queer jumbling of time as a projection for future survival. Though rooted in different genres, with *Hatoful Boyfriend* being a post-apocalyptic sci-fi story and *Tusks* being medieval fantasy, they ultimately both privilege the act of repeatedly forming queer relationships as a means of future survival.

The "true" ending of *Hatoful Boyfriend*, a route called "Bad Boys Love," is rife with the ways the school and government in the gameworld has been controlling and managing the birds' and protagonist's life. To give a quick summary of the events, at this point in the game, the player has romanced all possible pigeons, and suddenly takes the role of Ryouta, Hiyoko's pigeon best friend. The route opens with Hiyoko's murder, and Ryouta tries to find out what happened, while the school is simultaneously walled off in an emergency drill. The player learns that a faction of the bird government has been conducting experiments on pigeons in the school, to create a virus that will wipe out the remaining humans. Ryouta finds out he was infected with that virus and accidentally killed Hiyoko. However, the human friend's brain was preserved and transported to a robot, who retains some memory of Ryouta and chases him throughout the school, though it cannot speak. Ryouta ends up accidentally "killing" the robot as well, because he does not know it contains the protagonist's brain. However, her brain is again barely preserved and once all the villains are eliminated, Ryouta locks himself in a chamber with the protagonist's brain, waiting for a cure for his virus and his friend, and in the epilogue section, a cure is found.

Much like the previous routes, this portion of the game dissolves any illusion of choice the player had. The player still chooses options at key moments, but these choices do not affect the overall outcome; there is no way to stop the major events from happening. Overall, the one-to-one couplings the player built previously are not helpful, because no matter what happens, there is still a larger state conspiracy at play, suggesting that though thought-provoking, these kinds of monogamous, ultimately heterosexual pairings do not work in this future. This route also blurs the boundary between human and pigeon more than the previous routes by creating a dual identification for the player between protagonist human Hiyoko, who they previously played, and pigeon Ryouta. Everyone's bodies in this route seem porous or easily destroyed, as Hiyoko's corporeal form is destroyed twice and Ryouta is infected with the virus, emphasizing the porosity of the body. By tracking the human body, *Hatoful Boyfriend* indicates the need to break down strict bodily boundaries to find a way to exist in this world.

However, this porosity does not necessarily indicate danger, as it leads to the ending scene with Ryouta and the brain, which is very intimate, portrayed by an all-black background and white text with no character sprites. While the post-credits scene in the game provides the ultimate "happy" ending (a cure for Ryouta and the protagonist), I would like to conclude by resting in this place. The brain asks Ryouta to tell it what happened. Ryouta ends the game by saying, "Where do I start? Everything that's happened, what's happening now, and – everything that might happen, one day. We have plenty of time to talk about it all." In these last moments, Ryouta invokes a consideration of past, present, and future, reminding us that memory building is a central mechanic to dating games. Throughout playing, the player has explored different paths with different, unexpected outcomes multiple times, and this process is the emphasis as the game ends. In one way, *Hatoful Boyfriend* falls in line with the queerness Andlauer (2018) identifies in dating games in general, where the female player forms multiple intimacies and privileges infidelity over one, monogamous ending. However, since those initial monogamous routes ultimately fail in *Hatoful Boyfriend*, the game does not frame them as ultimate happy endings. The goal is not heterosexual monogamy many times over, but to think about the porousness of supposed rigid animate hierarchies, and how we've already formed—and will continue to form—nonnormative intimacies with other humans, animals, and things. As Ryouta assures the protagonist that they have "plenty of time to talk about it all," he indicates that there is a future for them, and that it is through a focus on these queer relationships they have formed.

*Tusks'* story is less action-packed, as its slower-pace and episodic events encourage the player to take their time experiencing the orcs' journey north. There are no jarring interruptions, crashes, or glitches either, as has become somewhat common with dating game parodies. The orcs simply make it to their destination, though their future is uncertain in an increasingly hostile world. At this point, the narrator frames the orcs' journey as a historical text, and its visuals echo *Hatoful Boyfriend* with its black screen, white text, and no character sprites. The narrator claims that there have been many versions of this story, which is a meta-acknowledgement of the player's many playthroughs. The game also explains the benefit of re-telling and re-interpreting a story, particularly for the queer community: "And this [re-telling] also allowed for a form of relation and communication across the vast distances and generations between successive readers and writers, many of whom were lonely and isolated, seeking a clan – a community – of their own." What these ending lines point to, much like *Hatoful Boyfriend*, is the *process* of continually re-interpreting a story across boundaries, both temporal and geographic, forming transnational collectives across times. It is, as I have noted elsewhere in this dissertation, a particularly fannish form of activity, to create community through continual remixing and

reworkings of text, and what Alexander comments on through *Tusks* is that it is also a particularly *queer* form of activity, one that is both a queering of “straight” narratives, and also one that allows individuals to connect over sharing queer experiences through time.

At this point the narrator also mentions that some claim that the protagonist character did not exist at all in the story, that he was an insert for early researchers to take part in what they were reading, “incorporating themselves into the fiction itself, for self-expression and discovery.” In *Tusks* narrative, the orcs as others have been excluded from the humans’ stories, and the humans in the game reject them at institutions of higher learning making it impossible for their culture to be officially archived. Alexander (2015) said that the game was a way for queer people to see themselves in a setting (pseudo-medieval Scotland) that normally does not include them. So in one way, *Tusks* allows queer players to insert themselves in a historical narrative that has excluded them and reclaim and reassert their existence. However, I also argue that this ending shifts the importance away from the hegemonic authority of the written text and onto the player’s embodied experience, or to use Diana Taylor’s (2003) terms, it emphasizes the importance of the *repertoire* (embodied knowledge not captured in written archives, such as gestures, movements, sounds, and other performances) as equal to the archive (written, textual documents).

The last lines in the game take on a similar structure to *Hatoful Boyfriend’s* and more explicitly call out the choice mechanic: “I hope the version of the story you read told you something worth hearing. And if not? You and I can reinterpret it and rewrite it, together or individually, until it works.” *Tusks* is not about passing on an immutable truth or “setting the record straight.” Rather, it is about the experience of a player performing their own story and building their own community, as many times as they need to. The game acknowledges that re-playing is important aspect of dating games, but queers time further by suggesting that any written record or “true” ending is not what the “play” is about. Time becomes disrupted, collapsed, looped, and re-played, ultimately leaving the player with not a series of straightforward, linear routes but a series of queer relationships (with humans, animals, and things) that exist simultaneously in the past, present, and future. And the most important mechanic is the queer repertoire, or the embodied, lived experience of non-normative relationships, to find other ways of existing in a world that continually tries to structure our intimate relations.

## Conclusion

I would like to end with a consideration of the “wall” as metaphor that permeates both *Hatoful Boyfriend* and *Tusks*, to try and pull together all the various ways dating game parodies both expose underlying structures and look to queer intimacy as a mode of future survival. Walls appear repeatedly in both games as overt and metaphorical imagery. In *Hatoful Boyfriend*, there is visual evidence of previous walls from the previous world order, as the background landscape is littered with buildings, symbolizing the shift in animate hierarchies from human to bird. However, the school is literally walled off in the ending route, indicating that just because a hierarchy *shifts* in its post-apocalyptic future, does not mean that the new “top dogs” (or birds) will not reproduce former biopolitical controls. In *Tusks*, humans erect walls to keep orcs out of both human-owned land and institutions of higher learning, which act as metaphors for queer erasure that persists in our societies today. Walls, or boundaries, between species (human/bird, human/orc) and between nationalities (lest we forget the “banana head” commentary from

*Hatoful Boyfriend*) are what govern the bodies in these two dating games. Importantly, these are state-sanctioned walls, meaning that *Hatoful Boyfriend* and *Tusks* are not simply commenting on personal prejudices, but structural inequalities that divide its characters. In each of these disruptions, the parodies ask the player to recognize the role that race and nationality plays in structuring animate relations, which comes out in their narratives but also through the genre's ties to Japanese pop culture. Given the genre's international popularity, which is sustained on transnational fan activity, each dating game parody is always in relation to the Asiatic *and* transnational fandom.

Structurally, these games ask players to break the fourth wall, much like certain theatre shows. Dating game parodies run on the assumption that the player understands the structure of dating games, and that they'll be able to understand all the ways the games depart from their norms, creating a meta-game for the player to recognize through in-jokes and diverted-patterns. This also, then, continually takes the player out of immersion in the games' stories, dissolving the boundary between discrete fictional world and "real life." Sometimes, as mentioned, there is an option for the player to interact with the computer interface, as an animate object. In *Date (almost) Anything Simulator*, one of the true "romantic" endings a player can get is with the game UI. In this ending, the player constructs the UI's love confession, choosing between three different lines at a time to make a coherent speech. In one way, this queers the relationship between player and virtual game, acknowledging that in dating games, the player is *really* romancing virtual computer simulations. However, because the *player* chooses the lines for the love confession, it also blurs who is doing the romancing and *to whom*. Is the player in a relationship with the computer UI, or themselves? Or both? As all the options on screen for the love confession work simultaneously with each other (both in sequence and when reading all the options on the screen), there is no "right" choice, making this ending more about *choosing how* you (the player) will love. It also melds player and game into one, as they simultaneously become romancer and romanced. While certain games handle this type of breaking the fourth wall differently, dating game parodies always involve exposing and playing with borders, and no/body (as in, no defined body, corporeal or otherwise) is a stable entity. The games, then, turn to queer relationships and the performance of them as the player repeatedly forms them, as a recuperative space for survival in the future, present, and past.

## Chapter Four

### Looping: Potentialities of Movement in Okada Toshiki's *God Bless Baseball*

After three chapters about K-pop and anime media and fandom, this chapter switches to baseball. However, much like my object of analysis – Japanese playwright Okada Toshiki's *God Bless Baseball* – this chapter is not really about baseball; or rather, it is not *only* about baseball. Though the play begins with a discussion about the rules of baseball, it soon meanders through a myriad of other topics, seemingly without connection, leaving its namesake behind. *God Bless Baseball* is not a plot-driven play, but rather comprised of conversations that encompass a thorough meditation on the contemporary relationship between Japan, South Korea, and the United States. One character justifies all these topics during a moment that seems particularly disconnected from the sport: “Is there anything unrelated in life? No. Therefore, there is nothing unrelated to baseball” (Okada 2015, 128).<sup>1</sup> While the character is echoing the popular sentiment that baseball is a metaphor for life, this bit of dialogue also draws attention to how baseball mediates of relationships as a transnational popular culture, and how it runs through the personal, the local, the regional, the global, and then around again. In the world of the play, baseball becomes what Sianne Ngai calls a “quilting point,” or “something like a bounded field” (2012, 22) that stitches together Asian media, corporeal movement, fandom affect, and digital technology to comment on the state of contemporary bodies conditioned by globalization.

One reason that I include this play in this dissertation is that it gives me the opportunity to apply the concepts I have developed on digital fandom performance within K-pop and anime to another related media that is integral to the transnational relationships of Japan, South Korea, and the United States. However, I also expand on digital fandom performance in this chapter, by showing how Abigail De Kosnik's (2018) concept of *forced fandom*, or the imposed love of cultural products from one's oppressors, can circulate as part of transnational Asian popular culture. Forced fandom is a useful framework for looking at transnational media because it lays bare how feelings and affects of fandom often “undergird and abet real-world hierarchies” (De Kosnik 2018, 269) and underscores the importance of imperialism in global media that structures audience relationships and attachments. In this chapter, I analyze *God Bless Baseball's* commentary on U.S. global hegemony and how baseball can be thought of as a global Asian media that affectively binds the Japanese and South Korean characters together, who embody their condition as transnational subjects affected by global flows that extend beyond national borders. I also show how *fandom* is central to this configuration, both through forced fandom and through the fannish corporeal movement the characters perform.

Another reason I draw out fandom and affect together in *God Bless Baseball* is because of their potential – or not – to break through oppressive, hegemonic structures through movement. As has been discussed throughout this dissertation, many fandom scholars see fans' activities as having the potential for breaking or blurring borders through the freedom of fan remixes that trouble the boundary between producer and consumer, and to create their own more inclusive worlds or transnational communities. The very movement of fandom – how it circulates and passes through fans across borders – creates the conditions of possibility to break binary or dominant media cycles. Similarly, for affect scholars, much of affect's potential to

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of lines are mine, unless otherwise stated. For the play text, I am referencing the script as published in the December 2015 issue of literary magazine *Shinchou* (新潮). The performance I reference is from Tokyo/Festival 15, at the Owlspot Theatre in Ikebukuro, Tokyo, November 21, 2015.

change the status quo lies in *movement*. Brian Massumi's (2002) *Parables for the Virtual* laid much of the groundwork for viewing movement as affective and creating qualitative change, for when a body (though not necessarily a human body) is in motion, it is in a period of transitional immediacy, "that of a body to its own *indeterminacy* (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)" (5). Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe affective space as an "inventory of shimmers," which evokes the feeling of always being in a state of unrest or movement, no matter how incremental. These changes in gradation offer the ability to pinpoint a moment when the "stretching of (or tiniest tear in) bloom-space could precipitate something more than incremental" (2010, 12). The slightest possibility of motion means the slightest possibility of an *otherwise* or *something more*.

However, *God Bless Baseball's* affective, forced fandom space questions the potentiality of movement and its ability to truly transcend hegemonic structures. The overarching image in the play and in this chapter is that of an umbrella – something which covers the play space both literally in the stage design and metaphorically through the "protective" watch of U.S. imperialism over Japan and South Korea. The affective umbrella environment in the play permeates the characters' bodies, and even though the characters are constantly moving either through kinetic baseball motions or through Okada's signature choreographic style, they are never really getting anywhere. Here forced fandom becomes not only an invisible force, but a lived, embodied experience where affective movement reinforces global hierarchies that privilege the United States as the arbiter of the sport.

Much like how affects create senses of belonging or not-belonging, Craig Fortier (2016) outlines baseball's historical and current power as a boundary-maker, showing how narratives about the game's history draw boundary lines that include and exclude certain groups of people.<sup>2</sup> For example, in talking about the myth of baseball as a distinctly "American" sport, Fortier points out the ways various white settlers simultaneously erased and co-opted Indigenous Americans' presence when formalizing the game and its association with "America." Fortier also notes that the baseball diamond functions as a "communal space" within baseball culture (11-12), both historically as a common space for people to gather (though still under settler property rights), and conceptually as a "return to home" that is deeply lodged in settler rhetoric. Though all sports function as boundary-makers, the emphasis on baseball's physical space being both an affective metaphor for life *and* its association with the American dream, coupled with the sport's transnational spread and strong presence in Japan and South Korea, provide a way to see how transnational media can create affective, forced fandom media geographies. I will trace how the show recounts baseball's forced fandom history in Japan and South Korea, as at different historical points the United States used the sport as an assimilation tool and a promotion of "American" ideals in both countries. Additionally, baseball in this play represents a doubling of forced fandom, as the sport was also used by Japan as an assimilation tool and control tactic during the country's colonization of Korea and Taiwan (Cho 2016).

*God Bless Baseball* re-creates this affective environment to question the fixity and power of it: What is the result of forced fandom? And is there a way to change it or break out of it? Though much of the play seems to hold a pessimistic view on the answer to these questions, in its final moments it does provide a different way to think about change. In my concluding section, I will explain how the play does find hope in *looping transference*, or the repeated, embodied movements that spread from fannish body to fannish body over online networks.

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding baseball's ability to draw communal boundaries, Fortier cites Noel Dyck's (2000) concept of "boundary work" or process by which imagined communities are constructed in sports.

Perhaps the most out of all the objects in this study, *God Bless Baseball* shows fannish, transnational movement as a tool of de-imperialism, without relying on to ethnocentrism, nationalism, or what Younghan Cho calls sub-imperialist desires (2016, 942).<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, however, the play's ending resists any definitive interpretation of any *one* solution. Therefore, I argue that rather than fannish movement being *the solution*, it becomes a method for the characters to step outside their current reality.

While I have positioned this baseball-oriented chapter as something of a thematic break from my earlier chapters on anime and K-pop, I would also like to note that given baseball's cultural prominence in both Japan and South Korea, it is not a stretch to consider it in relation to anime and K-pop. Baseball stories are popular settings in manga and anime (Keaveney 2018) and sports stories in general are integral to anime fandom, particularly within yaoi or Boys' Love (BL) (Takahashi 2005; Saito 2011). In regard to K-pop, throwing the first ceremonial pitch at professional baseball games is almost a rite of passage for young K-pop idols and fans will often discuss their favorite pitches by idols (*Seoulbeats* 2012). By focusing this chapter on a play about baseball, I show another transmedial thread that connects anime and K-pop fandoms and creates their media ecologies. Implicit in this argument then, is the call for studies of media fandom to include sports fandom, as others before me have done (see Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007). Fan studies tends to focus on audio/visual media fandoms for TV shows, movies, and musicians, but given the incredible number of globalized sports fandoms and how mediatized these sports are (utilizing broadcast and digital media, not to mention live performance) there are many intersections to be explored between sports and media fandom. Including *God Bless Baseball* is another way for me to show the transmedial breadth of transnational Asian popular culture and how the sport creates what Thomas Lamarre (2015b) calls an affective media geography, or a sense of a region connected through media distribution.

Lastly, though Okada is an internationally successful playwright, there are not many scholarly works written about him in the English language, and as of this writing, none written about *God Bless Baseball*. I hope to begin to fill in this gap in the English-language scholarly literature on Japanese theater and give attention to a contemporary playwright whose work often focuses on transnationalism or globalization and rupture.<sup>4</sup> Performance studies scholar Uchino Tadashi (2009, 143) argues that "rupture" is central to Okada's previous work, and *God Bless Baseball* continues this as well. The play works hard to disrupt the audience's expectations surrounding the nationalities of its characters and national imaginaries through a meta-commentary on theatrical performance, and further ruptures the relationship between character and performer, the national and transnational, idol and fan, and body and speech. Through these critiques, Okada's play seeks refuge in uneven, transnational relationality mediated by baseball, rather than turning to nationalistic ideologies.

### **Disrupting a fixed nationalistic reading**

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<sup>3</sup> Younghan Cho argues that de-imperialization must go together with de-colonization, as a broader movement. He cautions against "sub-imperialist desires" that can arise in a de-imperial process, which would be countries vying to become imperialist or mediating powers themselves through economic or cultural exports, such as electronics or popular culture (2016, 942-43).

<sup>4</sup> Not all of Okada's work is as transnational as *God Bless Baseball* and many of his works take place in contemporary Japan. However, Uchino (2015) points out that globalization as a theme is often enfolded into Okada's works, which is one of the reasons why his plays have been internationally successful, along with a few other contemporary Japanese theatre artists whose works have been successful abroad.

There is little action-based plot in *God Bless Baseball*. The play begins with two characters, Woman A (speaking Japanese) and Woman B (speaking Korean), discussing the rules of baseball, or rather, how they do not understand the rules of the game. A character named “Man” (speaking Korean) enters to explain the rules, but he messes up the explanation because he does not really like baseball and Woman A and Woman B’s questions confuse him. Then, an impersonator of the famous baseball player Ichirō Suzuki (speaking Japanese) comes out and tells them about baseball (this character’s name is “Ichiro(?)” with the question mark included). The last character to appear – though only aurally – is the “Voice” (speaking English) that emanates out of a giant, white circular *obje* floating over the minimalistic set (see figure 1). Many reviews compare the *obje* to an umbrella or a baseball (see Kimura 2016; Morii 2016; Yoon 2016; Nahm 2017; and Marques 2016). The rest of the set sparsely resembles a shrunken baseball diamond with two projector screens in the back for subtitles (in Japanese, Korean, and English). Given that there are few other props (baseball bats, balls, an umbrella, and a hose), the

*obje*’s presence, both literally and figuratively, dominates the set.

From here, the conversation meanders from topic to topic, with only the tenuous thread of baseball connecting both personal stories and global events like the IMF intervention in South Korea during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, local snacks, and Taiwanese group’s petition to become the 51<sup>st</sup> state in the United States, showing how the sport threads through various levels of the local, regional, and global.



Figure 4. All characters stand under the *obje*. Photo by cheltfisch.

Eventually, Ichiro(?) leads the characters in a detailed movement exercise and then commences the ending sequence for the play, where the characters gather under an umbrella and eventually *leave* the umbrella. The *obje* undergoes a transformation. Woman B reminds the audience that the play is not real. And then it ends. It is nearly impossible to convey all that *God Bless Baseball* encompasses in a plot summary, because the movement of the plot is not as important as the affective, transnational atmosphere created by the performers’ moving bodies and their relationship to the floating *obje*. Crucially, the written text only makes up half of what the audience experiences with the play, and the performers’ corporeal movements transmit a large portion of the play’s themes.

I note what language each character speaks because the play was a multilingual collaboration between Japanese and Korean actors, under Okada’s direction and assisted by Korean dramaturg, translator, and interpreter Lee Hongyie, and the language each character speaks is important to the play’s themes around “nationality.” In one way, the play reinforces national boundaries between its characters. It does not shy away from the idea of how

transnational sports circulation can work to bolster nationalism. “Nation” becomes particularly clear in sections where the characters talk about Japan and Korea’s ranks in the World Baseball Classic in a comparative, antagonistic way, which recalls the countries’ colonial history.<sup>5</sup> For example, Woman A (playing a Korean character) recites a long monologue where she impersonates her father complaining when Japan won the 2006 World Baseball Classic, despite losing to Korea in two out of their three games. They also speak about famous baseball players from each country as if those players embodied each nation – an idea deeply embedded in all sports logic – such as when Woman A says that famous player Park Chan Ho gave Korea “hope” during the IMF financial crisis, because his success in Major League Baseball (MLB) at that time symbolized Korea’s ability to overcome hardship. And the United States figures heavily in the play, as characters pull out threads of how the economic relationships among all three countries relate to baseball. It is impossible to ignore the idea of “nation” in this play, and Okada shows how affectively charged this relationship is, by describing Japan and Korea as “brothers,” and the United States as a “father” that is simultaneously desired and not and solidifies the position of the U.S. in a global hierarchy.

But it is precisely because “nation” figures heavily in this play that it is important to also see how the play disrupts the impulse to perform a solely nationalistic reading of the play. By a “nationalistic reading,” I mean beginning an analysis from the assumption that the Korean actors represent Korea, and the Japanese actors represent Japan, which would make the performers’ bodies static symbols of their countries. *God Bless Baseball*, however, elides this assumption that nationality can be read in the body. Through a slippage of identity that the characters perform, the actors constantly confuse the audience (and themselves) as to what nationality they are. While it is known from the program notes that Korean actors are speaking Korean, and Japanese actors are speaking Japanese, in *God Bless Baseball* they are playing the opposite nationality; the Korean actors play Japanese characters (Woman B and Man), and one of the Japanese actors plays a Korean character (Woman A). However, this fact is not apparent from the start of the play, as the characters do not outright identify themselves as Japanese or Korean, leaving the audience confused with little context clues to deduce national identity since there is no defined locale for the set.

The text does not give the character details, such as specifics that might give the actor material to build a “realistic” character (as in a realist theatre tradition), such as hometown, an individual name, age, etc., and the character names/titles themselves show that four out of the five characters are in states of flux.<sup>6</sup> A question mark is a part of Ichiro(?)’s name and serves to question his identity, because although the character *mimics* Suzuki Ichirō, the performer acknowledges in the text that he is *not* Ichirō and is more like an impersonator. As for Woman A and B, though the designation “Woman” is the official English translation of their names, I feel it is slightly imperfect; in Japanese, they are *joshi* A and *joshi* B, which can mean both “woman” and “girl,” and usually indicates a younger woman. It also can be used for school-aged girls, more in the *shoujo* category of in-betweenness, where identity is not fully formed. Based on their personalities, these women seem older than school-aged, but retain a youthful naivete. Character

<sup>5</sup> Younghan Cho’s (2012, 540-41) study of Korean MLB fans shows how many posts on message boards about Korea vs. Japan baseball games results in fans’ expressing feelings over their colonial history.

<sup>6</sup> Vagueness around character details is typical of Okada’s plays and one of his early influences was the hyperrealism of Hirata Oriza, though nationality itself is often not confused in his other works. Oriza spearheaded the “quiet theatre” movement in Japan, a hyperrealistic theatre style that was a reaction to the boisterous theatre of the 1980s (Ogawa 2013, 99).

“Man” seems much more stable with the typical word for “man” in Japanese designating his name (*otoko*), but once he begins speaking, it is clear he is in a state of arrested development due to issues with his father. Man does not explain the rules well enough for Women A and B to understand, and it comes out that he does not even *like* baseball, but knows about it due to his father being a giant baseball fan, which he continues to struggle with during the play as he could never fully connect with his father over baseball.<sup>7</sup> The only character in the play that presents a stable, assured identity is the “Voice,” which functions as an authority figure and symbol of American hegemony by giving lessons on baseball history and transnational relations between the U.S. and Japan or Korea from a U.S.-centered point of view and speaking in English. Though the audience gets to know the characters through personal anecdotes or their opinions, details that would give satisfaction of “knowing” the characters (like a mystery solution pieced together through clues) elude them.

The premise that the actors are playing the opposite nationality is confirmed when they *break* character, which upends any expectation of character consistency. In *God Bless Baseball*, the actors break character often, confusing themselves as much as the audience. For example, at one point in the opening section Man speaks about his father being a fan of the Giants baseball team. Woman A thinks he means the Korea-based Lotte Giants, but Man means the Japan-based Yomiuri Giants, bringing further confusion to their national reference points — and reminding the audience that there is also a U.S.-based San Francisco Giants team, as well. Then Woman A interjects, “I might have misunderstood, but you’re playing a Japanese character, right?” to which the Man responds, “Yes, that’s right” (Okada 2015, 112), dropping all pretense of maintaining a “character.” As characters question their roles, they show that even the performers are uncertain of their identity. In another exchange, Man confirms Woman A’s role as a Korean character, but cannot confirm Woman B’s role. Man asks, “Woman B, which are you [Japanese or Korean]?” Woman B turns the question back on him, and in turn, the audience: “Which do you think?” Man responds, “It’s difficult to tell,” and drops the topic there, never really confirming Woman B’s nationality (116). This shows that their characters are not as fixed as one might think, and even when breaking character one can never be sure as to what role they are playing.

Confusion becomes key to how the work upends national identity. Importantly, the play does not get rid of national identity – which would problematically flatten historical context – but confuses it through the actors’ multiple switches during the show. The actors consistently address the audience and recognize that they are playing roles, flipping back and forth from actor to character, which results in their identities and bodies becoming pluralities of performance that slide from one position to the next. At times, they are telling a character’s story that is clearly supposed to be a Japanese or Korean character, and other times, it is unclear whether they are speaking as performers, as characters, or as both. Instead of their performance illuminating a specific, nationalized character for the audience to *know*, their play with languages, roles, and performance makes their role and therefore their nationalities deliberately confusing and ultimately, turns the play world into a puzzle that is impossible to solve.

The one exception would seem to be Ichiro(?), as a Japanese actor speaking Japanese, playing a celebrity who is Japanese. However, when he comes onstage the first time, the actor

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<sup>7</sup> This is not the first time that Okada’s characters have been associated with the current younger generation and also children. Uchino Tadashi classified Okada’s play *Five Days in March* (2005) as part of a theory and discourse in contemporary Japanese dance called *kodomoshintai* (developed by Sakurai Keisuke), in which bodies are presented as immature and/or asexual and decidedly not adult (2009, 132-133).

says, “I watched YouTube videos of the famous Ichirō impersonator “Nichiro” – please enjoy the result” (the result being his performance) (Okada 2015, 113). In other words, the character Ichiro(?) tells the audience he is mimicking an impersonator’s portrayal of Ichirō, not the *actual* Ichirō, which again acknowledges that the actors are not their characters, but rather perform multiple, mediated roles and engage with the audience. Ichiro(?) is a copy of a copy, as Morii Masami (2016) puts it; he is playing the role of someone playing a role (Nichiro playing Ichirō), and his identity is always an open question. The constant awareness of character construction in the play suggests that while the idea of the “nation” is present, it is, as Lamarre also points out, simultaneously “nationalized, de-nationalized, and re-nationalized” (2015b, 111, emphasis mine) without the “nation” serving as a temporal starting point.<sup>8</sup> In the play, this simultaneous process happens in front of the audience, getting rid of both the idea that the nation is the primary origin point for these characters, and the assumption that we (the audience) can read nationality through appearance.

*God Bless Baseball* establishes radical disjunctions between body, character, and nationality, and Okada often foregrounded these types of disjunctions in his previous productions with his company *chelfitsch*.<sup>9</sup> There is rarely a literal connection between the words the actors speak and the movements the actors do in Okada’s works. In speaking of Okada’s internationally successful *Five Days In March* (2004), Uchino describes the actors movements as “without any psychological motivation” (2009, 143), meaning that the actors’ movements are not based in the assumed experiences of a character. This realist kind of approach could likely lead to a performance of *God Bless Baseball* that would be rooted in and dedicated to demonstrating the “correct nationality” of each character. However, Uchino stresses that Okada’s style is considered “natural” according to the actors’ “lived body” sensibilities they experience in everyday life, and that what comes from the body is not a symptom of the dialogue; put another way, the movements of the *performer’s* bodies are not limited to the boundaries of the *character’s* bodies or the words they speak (2009, 143).<sup>10</sup>

Uchino argues that the rupture between text and body in *Five Days in March* is based in a response to contemporary Japanese society and the “domination of Japan’s neo-liberal economic-social-political reality” (2009, 144) on youth culture, particularly the Lost Generation, which originally referred to youths in their late 20s and 30s that were most adversely affected by the Asian recession in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Yet Uchino also considers Okada’s directorial and movement style in many of his works to speak directly to the “inescapable reality of globality” (2015, 10), which he argues was part of *Five Days in March’s* success outside of Japan. It is important to note that Uchino is not arguing that Okada’s work is “universal,” but rather that the themes and performance style connects with contemporary globalization and resonate with different audiences “in small yet infinite number of open spaces” (2015, 10).

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<sup>8</sup> Here Lamarre (2015) is referring to Iwabuchi Koichi’s (2002) famous conception that Japanese popular culture products circulate transnationally because they are “odorless” or “de-odorized” of their Japaneseness. Lamarre alters this conception by pointing out that “Japaneseness” is also produced, and that Japanese products had to be nationalized to begin with. Through an analysis of transnational, transmedia sensation *Boys Over Flowers*, Lamarre concludes that the unity of a nation cannot be presumed as a foundation, but that products are simultaneously nationalized, de-nationalized, and re-nationalized, and that the process does not indicate nationalism first (111).

<sup>9</sup> “Chelfitsch” is supposed to be a childlike pronunciation of the English word “selfish.”

<sup>10</sup> According to translator and director Aya Ogawa, who has worked with Okada on multiple occasions, Okada tries to have the text and movement emerge from the same source – what he calls the “image,” which can range from a concrete object to abstract concept – rather than the movement be subservient to the text (2013, 100-01).

<sup>11</sup> There is now talk of a new lost generation emerging out of the more recent global financial crises.

### Forced Fandom Affect and the 51 Club

The performers in *God Bless Baseball* also bring to the fore what Uchino calls “the plurality of the performing body” (2009, 144) in Okada’s work. This plurality is shown through the multiple identities each character performs, but also in the numerous bodily conversations the characters have with each other, themselves, and especially, with the environment. While Ichiro(?) often demonstrates baseball movements such as swinging a bat and shows off his imitation of the player Ichirō, the other characters’ movements meander as much as their conversations. Their movements and gestures are a mix of baseball-related ones and aimless, pedestrian starts and stops – sometimes they pick up a ball and play a listless version of catch, sometimes they fiddle with the catcher’s gloves onstage, and sometimes they just shift or move their limbs in ways unconnected to the game. To me, they feel reminiscent of children at play and, especially, children when they are bored. At the beginning of the show, Man reminds the other characters that baseball’s time limit as a game is not set and varies depending on what happens in the game. Much of the characters’ movements reflect this uncertainty of time, and the characters do not give off a sense of performing choreographed movements with a definite start and end (though Uchino [2009, 143] and Ogawa [2013, 100] both note that Okada’s actors rehearse their choreography precisely) and rather bodies that are responding to the environment onstage and what happens in it.

As bodies and movement respond to the environment onstage, they produce a feeling of movement that is connected to the current, everyday situation; in other words, the contemporary environment causes a paradigm shift within the performing body, and yet in that shifting, bodily movement also houses the potential to affect the environment. As noted from Okada’s previous productions, movement is not secondary to the written text (which often takes prominence in play analyses), but in *God Bless Baseball* it is not wholly detached; at times, the movements form a dialogue with what is spoken, at other times they seem disconnected, but mostly the bodies onstage seem restless, unable to contain or direct their energy. All of these movements taken together illustrate the effect the environment has on the characters, and at the end of the show, the characters turn back to corporeal movement in an effort to break free from the *obje*’s power.

Given the oppressive environment onstage, I would first like to analyze what kind of environment the play presents and how it attaches to the bodies onstage. I see *God Bless Baseball*’s affective environment as one of forced fandom for U.S. cultural production, specifically baseball and its symbolic tie to American exceptionalism. Coined by De Kosnik, forced fandom is “a love for the media made by one’s oppressors; it is a fandom primarily imposed from without, in circumstances of political, economic, social, and/or cultural subjugation, rather than emerging from within the media user” (2018, 262). I should note that the term “forced” does not mean an immediate forcing of someone to do something (as in, strapping them to a chair), but rather an imposed attachment due to the strategic deployment of media by colonial oppressors over time. De Kosnik’s example is Filipinos’ forced fandom of U.S. media, brought into sharp relief when two “jokes” at Filipinos’ expense happened in rapid succession in 2007 on two popular U.S. television programs (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* [1999-2015] and *Desperate Housewives* [2004-2012]). The insensitive comments caused protests both online and off from Filipino audiences. De Kosnik’s example shows how “Filipinos feel affinity and fandom for American television shows that do not appear to be fans of their Global South

audiences” (265), or how a hierarchy of affiliation and *feeling* exists across transnational media audiences that is intertwined with histories of racial oppression and imperialism. De Kosnik claims that forced fandom as a concept illuminates how fandom is a primary, structuring force within transnational relations.

I should discuss why *fandom* itself is an appropriate framework to apply to this play and how the play references transnational, digital fandoms. I enter my analysis through a seemingly random, one-off fandom joke toward the end of the play. During a particularly serious moment when Ichiro(?) pins the number 51 on the other characters’ backs, the Voice mentions that everyone is wearing the number 51 as if it’s Robinson Day. Held annually on April 15, Jackie Robinson Day is when the MLB honors Jackie Robinson, the first African American MLB player, and on this day every player and on-field personnel wears Robinson’s number (42) in his honor. Ichiro(?) asks if the number 42 has a special meaning, and the Voice replies, “You asked me if 42 had some meaning? ’42 is the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything,”” quoting science fiction novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams (1979). This nerdy fan-favorite reference is a seemingly odd inclusion in a play about baseball and American imperialism, which has not overtly discussed media fandom. Ichiro(?) puzzles over the response asking, “Is that a joke?” To which the Voice says, “Yeah, it’s a joke. I guess you didn’t get it” (Okada 2015, 130), showing “42” as an in-joke, something that one would have to be a part of a fandom – or cultural moment – to understand. I believe this joke illuminates an important undercurrent throughout the whole show: transnational fandoms and media circulation, and how fans play a role in upholding transnational hierarchies of feeling.

Though the affective relation defined in *God Bless Baseball* has been mainly familial, one could also say it is fannish (and often fandoms describe themselves similarly as a “family”). In Maria Ines Marques’ (2016, 129) review of the play, she points to the idol-fan relationship as one of the binary power dynamics set up in the show, along with father-child and master-student. Some of the characters admire and reference certain baseball players and like Ichirō, Park, and Nomo Hideo, making it clear that some form of fannish relation exists between the characters and baseball. Baseball fandom is also enfolded into the language of the play itself. For example, at the start of the play, when the Man character enters to explain the rules of baseball to Woman A and Woman B, he points out that the women’s conversation has the same structure as an inning. A reviewer at the *Broad Street Review* (2016) similarly notes that the pace of the play could resemble a baseball game, with its long, slow pauses between actions, and with parts feeling like they are going nowhere at all.<sup>12</sup> The meta-textual references to baseball are present at *God Bless Baseball*’s deepest, structural level, and only an adept baseball fan would be able to glean all the references and in-jokes it contains. (And to be honest, I am not a baseball fan and I still feel that there are references I have missed, even when reading through the playtext.)

It is not only baseball fandom that permeates the environment, but also a *fannish* form of affect and movement, commenting on the central role that fans and their digital networks play in the globalization of popular culture. As I wrote in Chapter 1, my view of fannish affect does not necessarily mean a celebratory, or even “good” feeling, but rather is a repeated, embodied conversation with object and fandom community. Ichiro(?) most clearly demonstrates fannish affect throughout the play, with an emphasis on fannish movement and full-body analysis. Ichiro(?)’s very first line tells the audience that there is an Ichirō impersonator named Nichiro, and that he (the performer) studied Nichiro’s YouTube videos in preparation for this role (Okada

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<sup>12</sup> Broad Street Review (2016) describes the pace of the play as “excruciating” in its slowness, and perhaps humorously connects this to the way non-baseball fans view the game itself.

2015, 113). Therefore, while I acknowledge that in one way Ichiro(?) represents a famous baseball player and idol, I argue that the Ichiro(?) character is *not* Ichirō Suzuki, nor even Nichiro. Rather, I claim that Ichiro(?) embodies the circulation of fannish affect through digital media.

The process that Ichiro(?) implies with his entrance line is one of affinity and closeness; of hours spent watching these videos, repeating them, and learning. Ichiro(?) intimately knows the minute adjustments of Nichiro's body and through his repetition has formed a full-bodied conversation with the impersonator, much like the fan reactions described in Chapter 1. These fannish digital practices focus on the intimate "momentness" of the body – the body in motion taking a swing or stuttering at the plate – and how that momentness is then transferred to Ichiro(?)'s body through an affective, feeling-of-feeling relation with not one digital video, but a branching of networks. Breaking down the object's body into small "moments" inspires movement in another body, often then making it the object to be watched, much like how Ichiro(?)'s time with Nichiro's YouTube videos affected his body movements, turning himself into the performer as he states in his entrance line. To add another layer, the movement that Ichiro(?) analyzes is borne from the full-body analysis of *another* fan, Nichiro, who has gone through the same process. And when Ichiro(?) performs his Ichirō-like gestures, such as Ichirō's signature swing, they recall these networks and processes of looping transference. Ichiro(?) performs a transference of movement from fan-to-fan, effectively embodying digital, fannish networks that move popular culture products, stitching together a sense of transnationalism through movement.

At a practical level, digital technology is a large part of this play; the subtitles are run from computers and the projectors' displays are digital, and the Voice that pervades the space is one of digital technology. More specifically, Ichiro(?) names YouTube as a particular digital technology that is part of baseball's global circulation. YouTube videos are one part of new media's "small screens" – as film theorist Haidee Wasson (2007) calls them, specifically speaking of Quicktime videos – that are smaller than a TV or movie screen, alluding to this sense of being able to hold them in the palm of your hand, animating them, creating a sense of dominance or ability to be learned. However, depending on the factors of environment, they are also screens that can buffer, be interrupted, or be of less-than-optimal quality; things outside of the viewer's control. More importantly, Wasson emphasizes that small screens are part of larger networks and that these small screens are always enacting the process of those networks to which they are connected. By naming YouTube and its associated "new media" small screens, which are often the purview of fandom, Ichiro(?) brings digital networks into the conversation of global media circulation. Baseball circulates around the world not only through live games and television broadcasts, but also through the internet and small screens, and through baseball fans' bodies.

Lamarre (2015b) argues that the distribution of transnational transmedia can then create what he calls affective media geographies, or regions. So while Japan and Korea are considered in the same region, it is media *distribution* creates a shared sense of regionalism rather than presuming a region based on geography. However, though attending to affect within media distribution can disrupt fixed ideas of "the region," if one is not careful it can have the reverse effect, what Lamarre calls "expanded nationalism" (107). Expanded nationalism is when normative assumptions about nations tend to underpin work on transnational serialization, and when unexamined, they are displaced onto the region and reinforce nationalist and essentialist discourses, just on a regional level. To provide another model to expanded nationalism, Lamarre

gives the example of the transnational, transmedia phenomenon *Boys Over Flowers (BoF)* in Asia. *BoF* was originally serialized as a manga from 1992-2004, but during both its tenure and afterward was adapted into several live-action TV shows and movies in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, among others.<sup>13</sup>

Importantly, all the *BoF* incarnations that Lamarre cites were hits, and he argues that the manga is *not* privileged as the “original” within the fandom and every adaptation holds equal weight.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, this is a particularly *fannish* form of distribution, where “remix” is privileged over a sense of “original” and a shared sense of holding is valued over private ownership. Rather than the media itself, it is the distribution of transnational transmedia that creates a virtual sense of unity and an emerging sense of “something coming into common,” which does not correspond with geographic territory, but entails a “sense of affective possession, emerging in conjunction with the mapping of the transmedial onto a geopolitical domain” (94). Therefore, the *region* is borne of a fannish, affective sense of possessing a series without any claim to ownership – what Lamarre calls a sense of “to have but not to hold” (123). This model allows us to see how the distribution of baseball in *God Bless Baseball* stitches together the countries (Japan, Korea, and the U.S.) into a shared, affective, media region.

Unlike the equivalency between *Boys Over Flowers* transmedia incarnations, however, baseball in the play is presented as American in origin and the character’s investment in baseball is inextricably linked to the forced fandom of U.S. cultural productions. The Voice’s first lines tell the story of American missionaries and educators bringing baseball over to Japan (1873) and Korea (1904), in effect delivering a history lesson about the U.S. spreading its cultural influence and exercising soft power throughout Asia. These lines echo Andre S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman’s (2001) claim that baseball has an inalienable connection to U.S. hegemony and American exceptionalism (quoted in Cho 2016, 533). This uneven distribution, meaning that baseball still carries signifiers of one hegemonic country (the U.S.) with it, brings us to the other characters in the play and back to forced fandom. While I argue that Ichiro(?) embodies digital fannish movement that is integral to the spread of transnational media, it is difficult to say that for the other characters. Are they baseball fans, or aren’t they? They seem more conflicted about baseball and at times resentful of the sport. While I argued in Chapter 1 that fan affect does not necessarily mean “good” or “pleasurable” feeling, the sport continues to confound Woman A and Woman B, which might suggest that they do not have a mastery of knowledge about the object that often defines fans. And Man has negative feelings associated with it due to his *father* being an unabashed baseball fan, which separates him from the fandom.

However, despite not knowing all the facts and stats about baseball, these characters feel emotionally *close* to it, which is perhaps a better measure of fannish investment than some sort of test of knowledge. It connects to all their conversations, from snacks, to family stories, to global events, threading through their lives and forming them into a transnational collective. Despite not understanding all the rules, they *know* baseball because it is a part of their lives, and demonstrate a knowledge of the players (for example, when Woman A speaks about Park Chan

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<sup>13</sup> Lamarre connects the transmedia geography of *Boys Over Flowers* to the geographical East Asia region. However, there have also been adaptations done in Indonesia (*Siapa Takut Jatuh Cinta* 2002; 2017), India (*Kaisi Yeh Yaariaan* 2014), and the United States (*Boys Before Friends* 2013), which suggests that an affective media region does not have to map onto geographical regions.

<sup>14</sup> Lamarre also claims there is no original to *BoF* since the “original” manga was borne into a media mix strategy, and the author created a dialogue with fans when publishing the series, which created a multivocal, open comic (96-98).

Ho with admiration) and how the sport affects their lives. Though Ichiro(?)’s line that “nothing is unrelated to life” and therefore “nothing is unrelated to baseball” (Okada 2015, 128) is slightly humorous, for these characters it is clearly true, as if they cannot help being fans, due to the history of the sport in their countries.

Many baseball scholars complicate baseball’s status as a “global” sport, because of its close association to U.S. histories of imperialism, showing that any affective connection to the sport is automatically linked to ideas of American imperialism and exceptionalism. Fortier (2016) points out how the historical formation of baseball as a uniquely “American” pastime was and is always linked to settler colonialism, and specifically in his work about the erasure of Indigenous presence on Turtle Island.<sup>15</sup> By comparing two popular stories about baseball’s origins (the “Rounder’s theory” that baseball was a variation on the English children’s game “rounders” and the “Doubleday theory” that traced baseball’s origins to an idea by an American boy, Abner Doubleday),<sup>16</sup> Fortier shows how both work to naturalize baseball’s origins in the American settler state and culturally contribute to the “claiming of land, history, and destiny in which a distinctly American identity is forged within settler colonialism” (2). Baseball as a communal sport that is so deeply connected to American settler identity governs the boundaries of insiders and outsiders in the national imagination, both through origin-story myths and through physical bodily governance such as who is allowed to play the game. As for the sport’s global spread, scholars like Fortier and Cho (2016) point out how world tours in the late nineteenth century were planned with the express purpose to promote baseball as a modern sport in the U.S. “tradition” (and, of course, sell sporting equipment; see Fortier 2016, 7; Cho 2012, 533). Cho also notes that more recently, despite international participation, the World Baseball Classic is controlled by the U.S.-based MLB, and “planned and executed as an American event to be supported by the rest of the world” (2012, 538). Unlike other global sports that have seen a more even spread throughout the world, baseball is most popular in countries and regions where the U.S. has exerted the most influence or intervention (Cho 2012, 534).

Since the sport’s rise to popularity in East Asia occurred at the same time as technological modernization in the region, baseball also has a strong tie to the modern in the East Asian imaginary. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the introduction of baseball in Japan and Korea strongly related to a particularly American idea of modernity, linking industrial and social “progress” to the playing of baseball. As Cho writes, “Playing baseball often functioned as development and expression of *modern bodies*, tastes, and skills” in these nations (Cho 931-2, 2016, emphasis mine). I emphasize “modern bodies” here to show that if baseball is associated with modernization, it is also always tied to bodily regulation as baseball players embody modern subjects. During the development of baseball in East Asia, Cho points out that early sponsors and players were also industry men (railroad magnates, newspaper owners, etc.), so players’ bodies were directly tied to modern industry. Baseball was also encouraged throughout

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<sup>15</sup> Turtle Island is the name some Indigenous people use to refer to North America. In many Indigenous creation stories, a turtle is the symbol of life and earth. Usage of “Turtle Island” over the name given to the continent by colonizers helps shift perceptions of the continent. However, in this chapter, since I am specifically talking about U.S. imperialism and colonization, I use the terms United States and America.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Chadwick, a first-generation migrant from England and inventor of the baseball box score, created the “Rounders Theory” that baseball was a variation on the English children’s game “rounders.” John Montgomery Ward criticized Chadwick’s origin story and claimed that the sport was invented by a “genius” American boy. A special commission created to figure out baseball’s origins traced this “genius” to an American general name Abner Doubleday. Fortier shows how those in favor of the Doubleday Theory wanted to root baseball’s origins squarely in (white settler) America.

American military occupations after World War II and Cold-War Era geopolitics in order to foster “American spirit” (Cho 2016, 936). Cho argues that even now, baseball (in the form of the MLB) still retains the “emblem of the superior Other,” equating the sport to other internationalized American cultural institutions like Hollywood and Broadway (2012, 543), and that it is still considered a great achievement when Asian players are recruited to the MLB.

However, it should be noted that some scholars such as Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu (2012) argue that baseball’s history in Asia is more complex than a one-way transmission from the United States. Though Guthrie-Shimizu acknowledges baseball’s strong association with the U.S., her monograph seeks to overcome an “American sense of world-historical centrality” and disrupts the idea that baseball is solely an American sport (5). Contemporaneous with the formation of baseball in the U.S. were the formation of baseball clubs in other parts of the world, such as in Cuba, Mexico, and the Kingdom of Hawai’i, well before A.G. Spalding’s 1888 world tour (1). Guthrie-Shimizu’s argument is not so much about who created baseball first (and given its many disputed origins, that point is debatable), but rather that the U.S. explicitly promoted the sport as “American” when other countries also contributed to forming the sport during its early days of development. Baseball’s transnational growth in the late-nineteenth century means that the U.S. can never wholly claim a monopoly on the sport and Guthrie-Shimizu considers it a transnational pastime. Similarly, in a 2015 interview with art magazine *Bijutsutechou*, Okada expressed trepidation in how the play would be received in different geographic regions because he sees the play as dealing explicitly with East Asian geopolitics.<sup>17</sup> Though Okada sets up baseball as decidedly U.S. in origin, his use of the sport as a tie between Japan and South Korea and representation of geopolitics in the region show that baseball is – however fraught – not the sole “property” of the U.S. and is seen as very much part of Japanese and Korean culture.

Another important consideration is how baseball also evokes Japan’s history of colonization in Asia, which adds another layer to this forced fandom.<sup>18</sup> Cho (2016) uses the term “double binding” to describe this particular convergence of American and Japanese empires, where the colonized (in his study, Korea and Taiwan) experience dual colonization from both the U.S. and Japan, which is not temporally bound but rather continued via American hegemony under the Cold War regime. The term also emphasizes the “protracted co-dependency of colonizer and colonized during Japan’s domination of East Asia” (942), which shows Japan in a dual-position as a colonizing force claiming imperial superiority, while always subject to approval or legitimacy granted by “the West” (929). However, because of this dependency, the double binding hinders any utter domination and includes resistance and de-colonization efforts (942).<sup>19</sup> Cho illuminates how baseball has been used as a tool for resistance against colonialism and imperialism, from Korean players resisting during Imperial Japan’s colonization of Korea, or East Asian players and fans “besting” Americans at their own game (941). This nationalist fervor among both Japanese and Korean baseball players is similar to De Kosnik’s study of Filipino fans, who, in response to forced fandom, promote fandom of “Pinoy Pride,” or the Philippines or Filipinos (2018, 268). While I will show how *God Bless Baseball* does not take an ethno-centric

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<sup>17</sup> He also noted that European theatre critics in Gwangju, South Korea, where the play had its premiere, did not exactly rush to see it.

<sup>18</sup> Much like in the United States, Japanese colonial rule dictated who could play baseball and when and where, while simultaneously popularizing the game as an assimilation tactic within Korea and Taiwan (Cho 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Cho says that due to the “competitive and intricate dynamics” between the U.S. and Japan, the colonized, whenever possible, “exploited this competition to the point of being able to claim victories, although these were often symbolic” (2016, 942).

stance, transnational baseball fandom on the whole uneasily holds space for the global, regional, and national, recognizing their transnational participation in global baseball events, while also associating baseball with multiple nationalities.

*God Bless Baseball* does not explicitly deal with Japan's colonization of South Korea; at least, the characters do not directly talk about it. There is no mention of the so-called "Japan-Korea problem" (*nikkan mondai*) and given Japan's history using baseball as a tool of colonial oppression, it seems like an odd omission. Okada said in a 2015 interview that he intentionally chose to not discuss Japan and Korea's past, in order to examine a different facet of the countries' contemporary relationship. Both he and dramaturg Lee have discussed feedback they received from South Korean audiences when the play was first developed in Gwangju, where one comment in particular stuck out to them. The audience member worried the U.S. would be used as a convenient, simplifying "excuse" to explain Japan and Korea's relationship (2015), which would ignore Japan and Korea's history. However, while Okada ultimately did not address colonization as a formal topic, references to the two countries' history remain in the play through the mediation of baseball. At one point, Woman A (playing a Korean character) brings up an incident during the inaugural 2006 World Baseball Classic (WBC), where Japan and Korea played several games against each other. Though Woman A says the story is one her father told her, she "cannot forget it" (2015, 115), showing how baseball and colonial history are passed down generationally. During this WBC, (the real) Ichirō reportedly said that he wanted to beat South Korea so badly, they wouldn't want to play Japan for another thirty years, and Woman A relates how angry her father was at those comments. When Ichiro(?) tries to defend himself by saying the quote was not true (it was unfortunately mistranslated) and tries to explain what he *really* said,<sup>20</sup> Woman A doesn't really care. Her point is that the Korean team was provoked regardless, inciting a desire for "revenge" against Japan in many Koreans—revenge on the baseball diamond standing in for a military revenge on the Japanese army that Korean victims of Japanese imperialism could never experience.

The unspoken subtext to these lines is what Cho points out directly: that any baseball game between Japan and South Korea (or any of its former colonies) is considered a "historical grudge match" (2016, 941). Ichirō's comments at the 2006 WBC stoked fandom reaction in Korea (especially when Japan lost that particular game), and some fans interpreted referee calls during their several matches through a historical lens, explicitly referencing Korea's colonization (Cho 2012, 541). In the play, baseball similarly mediates underlying feelings around colonial history. When Ichirō points out that ultimately Japan won that year's WBC, Woman A says that Ichirō and the situation are so annoying, clearly not forgetting the past. While Okada does not (and probably should not) provide a solution and the characters clearly do not reach an understanding, he foregrounds Woman A's feelings as valid; any excuse Ichiro(?) tries to give is immediately rebuffed.

However, it is true that the play is largely concerned with Japan and Korea's relationship to the U.S. and the show sets up an affective, transnational, forced fandom atmosphere that is dictated by American hegemony. First, American influence through baseball is literally materialized in the form of the *obje*. As the arbiter of baseball history, the Voice and therefore the *obje* establishes itself as the dominant force of the physical set. Its positionality in the space—hanging in the middle of the air—forces the characters to look up at it in awe or terror (sometimes both), and its large, round umbrella shape seems to encompass the entire playing

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<sup>20</sup> Ichirō really said, "I want to win in a way that the opponent would think, 'we cannot catch up with Japan for the coming 30 years'. We should not merely win the games."

field. Additionally, well-known multimedia artist Takamine Tadasu served as the show's set designer. One of Takamine's most famous pieces, *God Bless America* (2002), was an inspiration for Okada and through the play's similar title, Okada cites Takamine's critique of the U.S. Created directly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in the lead-up to the Iraq War, *God Bless America* is a stop-motion video that features a giant clay sculpture sitting in the middle of a room. Takamine and his assistant manipulate and transform the clay into several different heads, including a caricature of George W. Bush. The clay heads sing "God Bless America" throughout the video, as Takamine and his assistant move at warp speed, shaping the heads and also going about daily activities such as eating, sleeping, entertaining friends, and having sex. In a 2015 interview, Takamine describes that at first, he thought about creating a piece that used words, but that the task of verbalizing the current situation – "a sense of incompatibility with the United States" – was too great.

In the same interview, Okada comments that the clay head in *God Bless America* represents a presence "too big to be seen" (2015) and that he too knew that his set would have to be sensual, rather than describe the U.S. through words or recognizable symbols like the stars and stripes. Okada said that in the past, his plays tended to feel "light and simple" with the inability to sense materiality within his work, which is why he asked Takamine to design the set. Much like the clay head in *God Bless America*, the *obje* is tactile and sensuous in its presence, and it looms over the space and acts as a physical, immovable force. However, its reach is also invisible as the *obje* extends through the Voice, like a speaker at a baseball game, so that it permeates the space aurally. Interviewer Shimanuki Taisuke (2015) compared the *obje* to HAL 9000 from the science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Hal is the AI system that controls the spaceship and subjects all the astronauts to hyper-surveillance, which eventually goes haywire and attempts to murder the entire crew.

Shimanuki's comparison of the *obje* to a powerful but menacing AI allows us to understand the *obje* as a technology of ubiquitous surveillance, all-seeing and all-knowing, like a god or a parent. At several points in *God Bless Baseball*, the *obje* even stands in for Man's father, as Man always speaks to the *obje* when he wants to talk with his father. Initially, when Man complains about his father's drinking problems, the Voice asks Man if he would cast judgement on his father now that he (Man) is an adult. Man is surprised that the Voice would address him, and the Voice takes on an authoritative, paternal tone saying that it is "no use lying to me" and ordering Man to place his hand on his heart and "tell me the truth." Here the Voice establishes itself as a parental figure, associated with the Man's father. Later, when Man relates an embarrassing incident that happened to him when his father forced him to do little league, he talks directly to the *obje*, asking at the end of his monologue, "Father, are you listening?" As the Voice establishes itself as an authoritative, paternal figure, it shows the stage environment as one that is emotionally encompassing as well as physically encompassing, illustrating that baseball and its associated ideologies affect the performers on every level.

The Voice defines major league baseball's affective ideology as a "field of dreams" that is "open to anybody, born anywhere in this world, to stand in that field, to operate on that platform" (Okada 2015, 125), perpetuating the idea that baseball – and therefore life – is a meritocracy and great equalizer, and ignoring structural inequities. It is telling that the Voice attaches the phrase "field of dreams" to baseball, which is a direct reference to the 1989 film *Field of Dreams* starring Kevin Costner. In the movie, Costner plays Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella who is driven by a "voice" (yes, similar to the one in *God Bless Baseball*, though much less ominous) to build a baseball field in his corn field in the hopes that infamous and deceased

player Shoeless Joe Jackson will come and play there. With the help of reclusive writer Charles Mann (inspired by real-life American writer J.D. Salinger), Kinsella builds his baseball field and famous players of yesteryear come to the field and have a game during the movie's climactic ending. The film ends with Kinsella reconciling with his deceased father who also came to play on the field. They play catch as the camera pans out to show hundreds of cars approaching the field. Though the film is a more contemporary addition to the mythos of baseball, the sport, the film, and its title (not to mention its famous tagline, "if you build it, he will come") are deeply attached in the American pop culture landscape, which was shown in 2017, when the Library of Congress selected the film for preservation in the United States National Film Registry. And in 2020, the MLB announced a historic game between the White Sox and Yankees in Iowa, adjacent to the movie set, which they called "MLB at Field of Dreams." By attaching the general concept of "dreams" to the "field of dreams," *God Bless Baseball* specifies that the dreams in the play are wrapped up in the *American* dream.

In the play, the Voice praises baseball players Park Chan Ho and Nomo Hideo for inspiring people to "have hopes and dreams" (125), where players inspire people to want *that* particular "dream" or platform (under the approval and within the U.S.'s cultural dominance). Cho defines this platform as "*America* as the field of dreams" (2016, 933, emphasis mine) because of the sport's association in East Asia with the United States and as the "premier symbol (as an invention of and stand-in for America) of the advanced or developed" (2012, 10). The Voice also draws attention to how Asian players within the MLB are representative of the sport's ideals of "hard work" and "equality," but that they are also representative of globalization. In attempting to prove Park and Nomo's greatness, the Voice mentions that they are a "rare sort of baseball player, born on Asian soil," simultaneously celebrating their achievements and othering them as different because they are Asian, and that it is "rare" to see a "magnificent" Asian baseball player (Okada 2015, 125). (And in this instance, what makes an Asian baseball player "magnificent" is their ability to compete in a U.S. league.) The Voice tells the audience that in 2015 the Professional Baseball Scouts Foundation honored both Nomo and Park with the "Pioneer Award" for their contributions to the *globalization* of the sport (125-126). While baseball was certainly already "globalized" in that it was and is popular in many parts of the world, the Pioneer Award focused on how Nomo and Park's success in the MLB opened the door for other Japanese and Korean players to make it in the MLB as well (The Korea Times 2015). Here, globalization specifically means the ability to play on a U.S.-sanctioned team and their ability to pull in global audiences to MLB games. What is important is that the players, like information channels, spread the U.S.-version of the sport and its ideologies globally.

The affective result of the play's environment is perhaps emphasized most during a conversation between Woman A and the Voice that intertwines both the 1997 IMF intervention in South Korea during the Asian Financial Crises and baseball player Park Chan Ho's rise to fame, from 1997-2001. In Cho's (2012) study of Korean MLB fans, Park and the IMF intervention are inextricably linked as Park was (and still is) seen as a national hero because of the positive effect he had on the population's morale during the crisis. The L.A. Dodgers recruited the amateur pitcher in 1994, though his glory days with the team were from 1997-2001. Nicknamed the "Korean Express," Cho notes how during this gloomy time, Park became a national hero and every minute success of his was reported as a national event, alongside political and economic news. He served as a bright spot for the country and a symbol of Koreans' ability to overcome crisis. Cho calls Park a "time machine," able to evoke feelings of nostalgia, nationalism, and hope. *God Bless Baseball* reflects the affective attachment to Park as

well, as during the Voice's staid description of IMF credit and economic restructuring, Woman A relates how Park Chan Ho was their (Korea's) "hope" during that time – and that it is not an exaggeration to say so (Okada 2015, 124). Woman A's admirable description of Park and his work ethic shows how fannish feeling intertwines with both Korean national pride and an aspirational view of the U.S., as she emphasizes how not only was Park's baseball skill great, but also his ability to assimilate into American life.

However, the play does not solely reinforce a one-sided notion of "hope" that Park symbolizes. Immediately preceding the IMF/Park Chan Ho conversation, Woman B is in the background, swinging a baseball bat and – as the Voice tells her – striking out. This moment of movement is a bit of a departure from Okada's style as described by Uchino (2009), since it is reflective of the text rather than seemingly having no relation to the words spoken. The swinging reveals how the atmosphere is simultaneously oppressive and hopeful, as Woman B tries to participate in "the game" and utterly fails over and over. Once the IMF/Park Chan Ho conversation is in full swing, Woman B interjects "You are discouraging us" (Okada 2015, 124), referencing the IMF intervention. She repeats this line again when the Voice lays out baseball's "field of dreams" ideology, but this time with a twist: "You are discouraging us. You are encouraging us" (125). Here, baseball seems to be an exemplar of what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism," which is when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, 1). Berlant argues that cruel optimism has prevailed in the United States and Europe since the 1980s, where promises of "the good life" and upward social and economic mobility persist despite evidence that liberal-capitalist societies can no longer deliver on those promises.

Though Berlant and Okada write from different cultural contexts, the precarity that Berlant isolates as a result of cruel optimism (the underlying suspicion that despite all your best efforts, the good life is still unattainable) resonates with Okada's commentary on Japan's Lost Generation through his plays. As mentioned, Uchino (2009) and Kee-Yoon Kahn (2013) note that much of Okada's themes and seemingly disconnected choreographic style reflects the aimlessness and uncertainty of youth in Japan unable to get steady jobs and attain lifetime, corporate employment. However, *God Bless Baseball* has a more pointed critique of transnational relations with the U.S. and – through its allusions to baseball as the "field of dreams" – the American Dream. Baseball as American Dream promises hope, equality, and the fulfillment of dreams for all, but delivers frustration and disappointment. While the Voice waxes poetic about baseball's "field of dreams," Woman B points out that this "dream" will always simultaneously oppress them. Baseball's false promise is that if you play, you can shed hierarchical differences and at least temporarily escape sedimented power structures; in fact, one could say that any athletic sport's emphasis on *physical*, kinetic movement aligns with its promise of mobility within a meritocracy. Through Ichiro(?), *God Bless Baseball* lavishes attention on the movement of baseball, giving ample time for the impersonator (of an impersonator) to show off his swings, the way he taps his foot, and his running around the plate, painting him as a body in *motion* that has supposedly succeeded in the field of dreams. However, in reality, the baseball player plays within a heightened symbolic field that is built on and reproduces the very structures that keep bodies in stasis—unable to experience radical social mobility, or "climb the ladder" of set hierarchies—in the first place.

The play makes an even more insidious suggestion that one does not even have to *choose* to play to participate on baseball's platform. As mentioned, the play begins with Woman A and B discussing the rules of baseball and how confusing they are. Man enters to try and explain the

rules, and while he appears to have a better grasp of them, his explanation falls apart when Woman A and B begin to ask clarifying questions. The “rules” of the game (and the current globalized situation) are confusing, even inscrutable. However, as Man begins to connect baseball to anecdotes to his father, it is clear that though the rules of baseball are still confused, Man is affectively “stuck” to baseball. Man’s forced fandom has been determined since his childhood by not only the wider culture in Japan, but also his father, who was a serious baseball fan, and so the game has a deep familial attachment for him, even if Man does not claim to be a “fan” himself and has a complicated relationship with it. Similarly, Woman A expresses a lot of knowledge about baseball teams, despite not understanding the rules, and demonstrates an affective, fannish attachment to certain baseball players like Park. Though the characters may express degrees of fandom and anti-fandom toward baseball throughout the play – yet another facet of their identities that is unstable – baseball fandom and its association with U.S. hegemony saturates the atmosphere by being the lens through which the characters view all their conversational topics. The play makes clear that despite not fully understanding the rules, the characters are already playing “the game” of the current situation and have been their entire lives.

Toward the end of the show, Woman A, Woman B, and Man pin the number “51” onto the backs of their costumes and cluster under a literal umbrella. Ichiro(?) then describes what the “51 Club” was, bringing the thread back to fandom, but national fandom. Ichiro(?) describes finding out about the “51 Club” in Taiwan, which he thought was a fan club for himself because his uniform number is 51. However, the 51 Club was actually a group of people that formed in 1994, who wanted Taiwan to become the 51st state in the United States. Ichiro(?) interprets this in English as, “51 is the *desire* to stand underneath the one gigantic umbrella” (Okada 2015, 130, emphasis mine). I emphasize the word *desire* to underscore how affective the number “51” is, which underpins the fannish feelings for U.S. hegemony. 51 becomes an affective node, a sparkling object that people gather around and desire to be surrounded – or covered – by its gigantic “umbrella.” The umbrella the other characters gather under clusters them together in a shared sense of relation; however, it is a limited umbrella that does not cover everyone in their geographical region entirely. While Taiwan is in their geographical region and has a strong baseball culture, it does not share the same affective relation that Japan, South Korea, and the United States share. “51” may represent the U.S. and its encompassing dominance, but the relationships between the U.S. and other Asian countries are not of equal strength.

Ichiro(?) continues, showing how *desire* is intertwined with *fear*: “In other words, 51 is the *fear* of leaving the shelter of the umbrella” (130, emphasis mine). The desire to stand under the U.S.’s umbrella is borne out of fear, fear of what it would mean to either *not* be included or fear of what it would mean to *leave* the umbrella. The play itself does not provide concrete details of the difficulties involved in extracting oneself from an atmosphere saturated with U.S. cultural, historical, and militaristic imperialism, but it does emphasize that to do so is undesirable by Ichiro(?) repeatedly saying it would be “dangerous” to leave – do the characters *want* to stay, or do they feel like they *have* to? The 51 Club strives to take part in this particular atmosphere, both protecting and caging the characters onstage. While there is a sense of “coming into common” (Lamarre 2015b) through baseball and fandom, it is not a relation between equals that Lamarre relates to *Boys Over Flowers* fandom. The play shows through the intertwining of desire and fear that this “commonality” is a club in which all members have uneven forms of power, living in a transnational relation that bundles promise and threat together.

## Your Back Is No Longer Your Back: How Environment Affects Movement

*God Bless Baseball* makes clear that the umbrella environment in the play affects the characters' material bodies as well, and questions whether there is any way to disrupt what seems like an all-encompassing environment. In this section, I will discuss how the play demonstrates how affective, forced fandom regulates bodily performances of adjustment, questioning movement's affective potential. As I noted before, an analysis of the play text only covers about half of the play, and the published script is only twenty-six pages (when performed the play is approximately 100 minutes). The other half is made up of movement and long stretches of not talking, and as Sakurai Keisuke (2016) claims, it is difficult to understand *God Bless Baseball* without a consideration of movement.

While affects can have devastating consequences of excluding others, they also impact bodies on a deep level, shaping and forming their movements in response to an affective environment, which opens the potentiality for the two to shape each other in non-violent ways. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2011) analysis of Proustian reality in *The Weather in Proust* provides a non-binary formation of internal and external forces by describing them as open systems, permeable to each other. In Proust, a change in the weather is "sufficient to create the world and ourselves anew" (7-8) showing how the inner and outer flow between the weather and the body is nearly osmotic, animating persons from inside and out, supporting by not consolidating borders, but rather "supporting their flexibility and permeability" (14). Similarly, Lauren Berlant (2011) sees affective atmospheres as shared, and that bodies continuously respond to them. The potentiality of affect emerges from its reciprocal relation with bodies as it permeates both the internal and external:

Its [affect's] strength as a site of potential elucidation comes from the ways it registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments [...] Its activity saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment that make a shared atmosphere something palpable and, in its patterning, releases to view a poetics, a theory-in-practice of how a world works. (16)

Berlant is concerned with how to formulate a present that is form-*ing* and magnifies minor performances of adjustment that bodies make due to their current affective environment, which for *God Bless Baseball* is a distinctly transnational environment. Attending to the cracks, gaps, and spaces of in-betweenness in the play, where performances of adjustment often become clear, shows not only the emerging present, but the emerging potentiality of its direction toward transnational relationships.

At the heart of theories on affect and movement (or how movement can be affective) are questions about movement's potential for change. While Sedgwick's (2011) open-systems theory shows both environment and body as permeable to one another (therefore showing how an environment could affect a body deeply), Massumi (2002) focuses on affective movement and the *process* of change, because it is in the process that potentialities arise, and directionality is undetermined. Massumi's concept of affect lies directly in the "relations between movement and rest" (20). It should be noted, however, that though he uses the word "body," he does not confine

“body” to a human, corporeal body.<sup>21</sup> Massumi does not discount human bodies, but they are not the primary site for affect, as the movement he is talking about is not physical, but the movement that emerges *with* the physical: “When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation [...] In motion, a body is an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary” (4). As this motion is an unfolding relation to itself, a double sensation of the feeling of feeling, it is an abstractness that only exists in motion (i.e. in “passing” and not in “position”) giving rise to indeterminacy, or an “openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now” (5). The sense of unity between movement and sensation is a *virtual* unity, abstract but real.

Massumi’s influence is widely felt, particularly in media studies, though there remains an impulse to tie affect to corporeal movement in order to examine both how media affects performances of adjustment, but also how *bodily* movement itself holds capacity for change.<sup>22</sup> In “Living between infrastructures,” Lamarre attends to what he calls “everyday modes of sensory mobilization” (2015a, 169) by closely reading bodily movements in response to the affective and audiovisual environment in commuting trains in Tokyo. What arises in a commuter train environment is a proprioceptive sense of *selfness*, as a molecular experience, that “reads” or “feels” the train, passengers, stops, starts, pressures, and gaps. The molecular, commuter self is then intensified, via their mobile phone through tactility that is “condensed and abstracted into a point, the tip of the restless digit that scrolls, points, taps, and clinks” (166). By paying attention to bodily experience as corporeal movement, Lamarre demonstrates how a body becomes amplified through multiple, mediated layers and holds the potential for creative countermobilization through a close reading of the anime *RahXephon*, which links affect, popular culture, and movement together.

Within the play, Ichiro(?) is the main character who talks about bodily movement and how his movements have become heightened through baseball. First, he ties baseball’s movement to the movement of life. He claims it is not just baseball that is an allegory for life, but specifically states *movement* is baseball: “Baseball begins when *you leave* the house you were born and raised in. [...] Run to first base at full speed with all your strength. Run desperately. If you can get to that base, your journey will begin” (2015, 126, emphasis mine).<sup>23</sup> In other words, baseball, and thus life, begins when one makes a strong move away from home (base). During this section, Ichiro(?) runs around the baseball diamond on the floor, stopping at each plate and dynamically rocking back-and-forth on his toes, waiting for the right moment to burst forward to the next plate. As the performer is playing Ichiro, a celebrity whose movements are recognizable (the way he swings a bat, etc.), he heightens all his movements with precision and intention, almost as a demonstration of how baseball has molded the way he moves. And as previously discussed, Ichiro(?)’s movements also become amplified in different ways, as he enfolds fannish, digital movements within his repetitious movements, carrying Ichiro, Nichiro, fans, and networks virtually as he swings his bat and taps his toes at the plate.

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<sup>21</sup> Seigworth and Gregg define “body” as such: “bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect” (2009, 2). This allows for an opening of relations between human animals, non-human animals, and non-living things.

<sup>22</sup> I will take Lamarre’s work as an example, though Mark B.N. Hansen’s *New Philosophy for New Media* provides a compelling reconfiguration of embodiment in the assumed “unembodied” world of the digital.

<sup>23</sup> This translation was reproduced from the show’s subtitles in Gemma Kaneko’s (2016) review on Cut4 by MLB.com.

Despite the dynamism of Ichiro(?)’s movement, the play makes clear that this movement is not unfettered; rather the “current situation” or globalized environment has affected movement, creating stuttering, uncertain bodies that shift back and forth but largely have to operate on a controlled platform. The other three characters’ movements are largely pedestrian. Fidgeting, playing with their hands, aimlessly shifting from side-to-side, the performers seem more like restless children than adults, augmenting their familial relationship to the Voice. They also perform concretely recognizable baseball movements, such as swinging a bat, throwing a ball, etc. However, due to the aimless, meandering pace of the show, and the casual way the characters will, for example, pick up a ball, play catch, and then drop it, these movements enhance the impression of children at play. Occasionally their movements seem to symbolically correlate to the spoken text, but for most of the show their bodies stop-and-start in a restless meandering, perhaps in a reflection of baseball’s pace as a game and also their agitation and inability to move outside the metaphorical umbrella’s cover.

The question of control, movement, and bodies enters the play directly when Ichiro(?) leads the other characters in what I would classify as an intense movement exercise. Up until this point, the conversation and movements of the characters meandered, flitting from topic to topic and gesture to gesture; however, the movement exercise becomes a centerpiece in the play because it is an instance of intentional, group movement together. Earlier in the play, Ichiro(?) demonstrated the common saying that when playing baseball, the bat becomes part of his (the batter’s) arm. Then right before the movement exercise, he says he is going to show the other characters the more advanced version of that saying. In the more advanced version, Ichiro(?) demonstrates the *opposite* of the bat/body saying. Rather than treating a non-body part as part of his body, he is going to treat a part of his *body* as *not* his body. Ichiro(?) begins fluttering his fingers and says, “For example, my fingers are no longer my fingers” (Okada 2015, 127). He demonstrates this with a few other body parts, before asking the others to join him, and everyone begins breaking down their bodies bit-by-bit, wiggling, shaking, and flailing their limbs and other body parts. Ichiro(?) leads, moving from body part to body part, instructing “Your hand is no longer your hand,” or “Your back is no longer your back,” until everyone is writhing on the floor and ends with: “Your brain is no longer your brain.”

The movement exercise marks a point of change in the play regarding assumptions of character’s bodies and control. After they finish the exercise, Woman A says that she was not sure if she correctly did the exercise or not. Ichiro(?) tries to placate her by saying that they did it well, but more importantly, he then says: “Or perhaps I should say that from the beginning every part of our bodies was not our own” (Okada 2015, 129). This line seems to indicate that the characters never had true corporeal agency in the first place. All the indeterminacy, stutters, and shifts of movement were an inescapable part of living under the global, uneven umbrella of American hegemony. Even when they broke down their bodies to minute registers of pure movement – which would seem to align with Massumi’s argument for potentiality within the system – Ichiro(?)’s line that *every part* of their bodies was never theirs appears to undercut that potential, that hope. It is no mistake that immediately after saying this, Ichiro(?) grants each character a “commemorative souvenir” for “working really hard” (essentially a participation award), calling to mind neoliberal ideals of individual hard work, as if the characters’ had a choice to participate in the first place (129). They all then place the number “51” on their backs, and Ichiro(?) and the Voice move into an explanation of the 51 Club, while shepherding the characters to cluster under a literal umbrella. As described in the previous section, Ichiro(?) associated his uniform number 51 with the 51 Club in Taiwan, which was a group of people

petitioning for Taiwan to become the 51<sup>st</sup> state in the U.S. Pinning his baseball number to the character's backs marks how baseball is intertwined with a desire to be a part of U.S. hegemon, and how it always marks the characters in the play; it is something they literally cannot shake off, or rather, the movement exercise with all its shaking and flailing reveals the number (and desire) they have been carrying all along.

This part of the play gestures to one of the pitfalls of trying to tie affect to material bodies, which boils down to: not all bodies are the same. Looking at the relationship between body and affect is important, because as Berlant points out, “change is an impact lived on the body before anything is understood” (2011, 36). In the becomings of an event, it will impact the body first – somatically – positioning the body as a site to look for the effects of affect. However, in attempting to pull the gradations of difference out of each body into shared experience, we run the risk of flattening all bodies and experiences. For example, I wonder how Lamarre's (2015a) sense of proprioceptive “selfness” applies to women in commuter trains in Tokyo, who also must negotiate potential unwanted groping from male train passengers, which has become enough of an issue to warrant “women only” cars (Reid and Yi 2018). As Berlant (2011) also notes, *whose* body matters, and when considering the relationship between bodies and spaces (environments) it is important to consider how spaces are *already* affectively structured, anticipating different bodies. Whether it be the “women only” cars on commuter trains, or an expectation of whose bodies step onto the baseball diamond, or which persons can cluster under the umbrella, affects of belonging and not-belonging impact how a body moves through spaces and they cannot be separated from bodily movement.

Film scholar Weihong Bao (2015) conceptualizes the relationship between affect, media, and bodies as an *affective medium*, which dissociates affect from a pre-social notion of “the body” and emphasizes the *interdependence* of affect, media institutions, and spectators in a constellation of social experience that also has the potential for reassembly and transformation. The affective medium foregrounds a “spherical” model of medium, which, rather than one singular medium encompasses a variety of media, technologies, ecologies, and spectatorial bodies in a shared space of experience (7). Crucially, affect is the virtual milieu that binds these components together; affect is “[n]either purely interior nor physiological,” not personal, but rather a “*the mirroring third space of the media intermediary* that yet envelops the media product and the perceiving subject in a continuous space. That space is never homogeneous but an experiential sphere through which the *interchange and tension* are acted out and transformed” (12, emphasis mine). Therefore, while bodies are a part of the affective medium, Bao is careful to note that affect does not originate as sensation *in* the body, thus dismissing the idea that affect is somehow “pre-social” or “natural.” When looking at transnational media circulation, this model opens a way to think of affect that not only disrupts singular genealogies of a medium, but also posits it as a relational space where “interchange and tension are acted out.” For Bao, film is an affective medium, whereas in *God Bless Baseball*, baseball is one as a media environment that stitches together technology, bodies, and transnational fan communities, and the “spherical” model of medium becomes literalized through its umbrella imagery. Therefore, in the play it is important to understand that the “affects” of baseball fandom that are felt within the bodies of the characters are not pre-social or “natural,” or not even according to an assumed “pre-social” geographical construct as Lamarre points out (2015b), but rather a result of the interchanges and tensions between the U.S., Japan, and Korea.

As the characters huddle together, Ichiro(?) warns them that stepping out from under the umbrella would be dangerous. One character hesitates and takes a step. Ichiro(?) takes up a hose,

sprays water toward them and responds: “If you don’t know [that it is dangerous to leave the umbrella], imagine” (Okada 2015, 131). Throughout the play, Ichiro(?) has been the character most positive about baseball, because he (or at least the person he is imitating) is a successful professional baseball player. He’s been friendly and helpful, waxing poetic about the game and leading the characters in a seemingly liberating movement exercise. Yet during the ending section, Ichiro(?) takes on a sinister tone, becoming the *obje*’s enforcer, controlling even the imagination of the characters. The affective atmosphere pervades their imagination and provides a physical threat in the form of water, urging the characters to immobility. *Don’t move, and you will be fine.*

### **Conclusion: What Can We Imagine?**

*God Bless Baseball* goes to great lengths to show how pervasive baseball and American media domination is for the characters, right down to the ways they move their bodies. But what solution, or response, does the play provide to this situation? In regard to Filipinos’ forced fandom, De Kosnik (2018) observed that many Filipinos’ digital protests called for a reinvigoration of Filipino pride, or essentially, to reverse their fandom and place their affections within the nation (the Philippines). However, what if (re)aligning oneself or one’s group with the nation, and strengthening a collective sense of national identity and pride, is not *the* answer? What if national pride is not the most effective solution to forced fandom—what if pride cannot “cure,” or override, forced fandom at all? I noted in Chapter Two that Michelle Cho (2017) expressed concern over a similar response to Asian pop cosmopolitanism within scholarship, that many scholars’ solutions were retreats to ethnocentrism. And in Chapter Three, the musical *KPOP*’s nationalistic ending (“*YOU* [America] need to cross over to *US* [Korea]”) belies the complex transnational crossings already at play within the show. Though going in reverse (back to nationalism) seems to be one popular response to forced fandom and the negative issues that arise within transnational media circulation, it seems too simplistic a solution that does not account for how nationalism can aid global hierarchies. I noted that Younghan Cho expressed concerns over “sub-imperialist” desires, where the global domination of one nation still upholds the logic of coloniality: “In the triad of ‘Asia-Japan-the West’ that the baseball trajectory encapsulates, ‘Japan’ is replaceable within the various conditions, and any country or discourse can emerge in a sub-imperialist position” (2016, 942). In other words, if and when any Asian country “beats” Japan at its own game and becomes a hegemonic power, it would still exist in a colonial logic and replace “Japan” within the “Asia-Japan-the West” triad.

It can seem like up until now, *God Bless Baseball*’s transnationalism is a thinly veiled expanded nationalism, with each country slotted into a global hierarchy based on region, with the U.S. at the top or very near it. However, very crucially, this is the structure imposed by the *obje* and its co-optation of Ichiro(?), and the other characters have continually questioned baseball and its structures throughout the show. Through play with performance, everything the audience thought they could glean about the characters through their names, backstories, nationalities, and bodily movements has turned out to be more complex. As *God Bless Baseball* indicates with its glitching characters, there is no going “back” to the national, and there probably wasn’t a “back” (a separate, stable, “natural” national entity) in the first place. If forced fandom can illuminate hierarchies of affection within transnational media circulation, it then can also illuminate how transnational fans respond to this affective structure.

Let us return to the ending of *God Bless Baseball* to see what sort of solution it provides, if any. Ichiro(?) explains the 51 Club to the rest of the characters. During his explanation, he lobbs baseballs in the general direction of Woman A, Woman B, and Man, who cluster together under a literal umbrella, unable to move because if they did, they umbrella would not cover them. As Ichiro(?) says, the desire to stand under the umbrella is *also* the *fear* of leaving the shelter of the umbrella (Okada 2015, 130). Woman B then deliberately and slowly steps out from under the umbrella. Ichiro(?) warns her that this is a dangerous move, but Woman B does not move. Ichiro(?) once again warns her of the danger and then commands her to return to the umbrella. Woman B “determinedly” (*ikkōni*) does not move. At this point, Ichiro(?) picks up the baseballs and throws them at Woman B, hitting her with them. As he does this, he repeatedly entreats her to “imagine” (*souzōshite*) what could happen to her and asking her to go back under the umbrella. Eventually, Ichiro(?) grabs a hose and fires a warning shot of water, which sprays and hits the umbrella that covers Man and Woman A. The water then arcs and moves toward Woman B, getting her wet. Man moves with the umbrella to cover Woman B. Woman B takes the umbrella from Man and does not hold it up, while more water hits her.

I describe this part in detail to illustrate how important movement is in these concluding moments of the play. Most reviews focus on the theme of “imagination” within the ending, and rightly so, not the least because the word “imagine” might be the most repeated word in the whole text besides “baseball.” By entreating the characters to “imagine” what would happen if they left the umbrella – implying that if they did, something bad would happen – Ichiro(?) shows how their bodies are controlled through a takeover of their imagination. And importantly, right after hitting Woman B with water, Ichiro(?) claims she is *not* imagining, because she clearly does not see (or feel) the danger of being outside the umbrella. When Woman B defiantly says, “I am imagining,” Ichiro(?) says that she’s imagining differently than what he meant; essentially, she is imagining *wrong*, which shows how deeply entrenched Ichiro(?), the *obje*, and baseball’s ideals sit. Woman B shoots back (in English), “Who’s the leader of the club that’s made for you and me?” (Okada 2015, 132), which shows him that she recognizes that the 51 Club really is not for *her* benefit.

However, bodily movement is as much a part of the final conversation as words are and is directly linked to the act of imagining, or rather, movement is imagining. The stage directions describe these movements and during the performance they are carried out with precision. And while Ichiro(?) speaks, Woman B’s movements act as her responses to what Ichiro(?) is saying. Her stepping out from under the umbrella was her first declaration of defiance. When Ichiro(?) threatens her, Woman B doesn’t just “not move,” she *determinedly* doesn’t move, turning what could have been “dithering” impasse (Berlant 2011, 4) into a defiant choice. Besides her own physical defiance, it is important to note that Ichiro(?)’s warning and imperative to “imagine” also includes physical violence, in the form of thrown baseballs and then spraying of water. *God Bless Baseball* always reminds its audience of the material, corporeal consequences of its environment, which makes Woman B’s physical moves of defiance even more striking. When Ichiro(?) claims she is not imagining, she tells Ichiro(?), “I *am* imagining” (Okada 2015, 132). Up until this point, her movements have been her response and her insistence that she *is* (already) imagining shows that the two – movement and imagination – emerge together.

At this point, Woman B turns to the audience and breaks the fourth wall. She tells us explicitly that up until this point, the play has been an allegory for reality and that from here on out is “an imagining that has no corresponding reality” (Okada 2015, 132). She then turns her back to the audience, the number 51 on her costume fully visible, and goes back to the

movement exercise from earlier, shaking her torso. She says: “My back is not my back. The number on my back is not my back” (132). Woman B comes to the conclusion that if her body is not her body, then it must follow that the “number,” or force, placed upon her body is not hers either. Much like everything else in the play, even if the current situation seems inevitable, even if it feels like it permeates the very air you breathe, it is *not* inevitable. Though the situation may have sedimented from years of piling up, it can be shaken loose and changed. And for Woman B, the way to achieve change is through movement, by breaking down those forced affiliations and re-create the potentiality of moment-ness where something can, possibly, actually change. What is revealed is that even though Ichiro(?) tried to control the movement exercise, it is too unstable to be controlled. Or perhaps, to assume we have no control is too easy to imagine.

Since Woman B goes back to the movement exercise, it is worth it for us to go back to it as well and approach it from a different lens. While it may seem like Ichiro(?)’s sole point is the control of the others’ bodies, I would like to look to another moment in the play where his bodily movement surprises himself. Ichiro(?) comments on the qualitative change his body (or at least, the real Ichiro’s) has taken. In describing the actual baseball player’s move from Japan to the United States, he says the way Ichiro hit the ball changed, and therefore his body changed. However, Ichiro(?) points out that crucially the real Ichiro did not say “I changed [my body],” he simply said, “it changed” (Okada 2015, 114). This is an instance where Ichiro(?) acknowledges that movement in the body is not necessarily always controlled, and while his bodily movement was affected by the environment, it was still a moment of surprise. I also would like to add that Ichiro(?) drops a brief fannish reference at the end of this speech, illustrating his point through a Bruce Lee quote (in English): “Yes, so it’s almost like ‘Don’t think! Feeeeel!’” (114). Ichiro(?) uses this line to show that letting movement happen, *feeling it* rather than thinking it, is important. Throughout the play, the performers never seem 100% in control of their bodies, which still makes their bodies sites of indeterminacies and capable of surprise, and therefore change, even to Ichiro(?).

Now I would like to return to the movement exercise, but this time through the lens of digital, fannish movement. As illustrated earlier, Ichiro(?) is not just the *obje*’s enforcer, but exemplary of fannish full-body analysis that focuses on the intimate “momentness” of bodies. By learning the process through YouTube, Ichiro(?) takes on both the fannish movement of impersonator Nichiro and transnational fandom’s larger, extended digital networks. Ichiro(?)’s movements always retain these networks and process of looping transference, and they do not stop with him. While the character may emphasize how “from the beginning every part of our bodies was not our own” (Okada 2015, 129), one could also say that the movement exercise passes fan-to-fan movement to the other characters and is very *digital* in method. Ichiro(?) animates the others by bit-ifying them, paying attention to the gradations and relatedness of parts that decenter the notion of “the body” as a unified whole. This could be read as a letting go of the body in the face of the digital (disembodiment), but by breaking down the parts – or rather, performing the looping transference of transnational fan networks – they are opening the potential for reassembly, moving into the virtual space that Massumi describes as the body’s “*indeterminacy* (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)” (2002, 5). Their bodies are reappropriated in small, moment-ary bits, on loop, passing on intensity. While one cannot separate out the cultural conditions in terms of global and national interests, one cannot either cut out the digital context that Ichiro(?) was born out of, and how it may affect this breakdown and looping of the body into moments, to re-animate already-stuttering bodies into intensity and potential.

Lamarre notes that the digital is at times equated with transmedia and transnational movement, because of its seeming ability to “transform everything [i.e. flatten difference] yet remain invisible, intangible, nothing at all – an all-mediating force” (2015b, 97). This potential for the digital to erase medium boundaries alarmed certain media scholars because its boundlessness meant that the digital could turn “even human beings into one (insignificant) medium among others” (97). In other words, the fight for medium boundaries is a fight for the *body* and conception of the self. Yet the digital also carries the paradoxical quality of drawing attention – visually, tangibly, or audibly – to the flattening of differences: “Digital media may imply a look, a feel, a sound, which artists may highlight in various ways [...] It comes to generate a sense of something non-equivalent, which is not localized in any one medium but in the *relation between media*” (97, emphasis mine). Lamarre points to the digital’s sensuous, felt quality to show that it is not about dissolving divisions, but that it can emphasize gradient differences or create new categories. Importantly, this happens through relationality and is not located in one medium.

I argue that this sense of relationality is what Ichiro(?) passes to the other characters and can be seen in Woman B’s final movement exercise. Morii Masami (2015) makes a similar observation about the end of the play, though not through a digital lens, but rather the modern conception of the self. Morii claims that in teaching the movement exercise, Ichiro(?) cannot be radical because he operates through a modernist framework of the self, where one is “myself” (*jibun de aru*) and others are “not myself” (*jibun ja nai*) (58-59), drawing strict divisions. Ichiro(?)’s exercise ultimately ends with control of one’s self where “subject” and “subordination” are the same (58). Woman B’s version of the exercise shows a rejection of a modernist sense of self, and according to Morii, allows Woman B to “return” to a self that is outside of control. Morii, however, does not elaborate on what kind of “self” this is, if it is not a modernist sense of self. Therefore, I believe we need to look at this section through the digital, fannish lens that Ichiro(?) also passes on. The movement exercise breaks down the characters’ bodies to get rid of the sense of “self” barriers between them, much like the digital discards medium distinctions, but what is not left is complete disembodiment, but a more connected sense of relationality to one another and the interconnectedness of our transnational networks.

After Woman B completes her second turn at the movement exercise, the *obje* makes a strange sound that marks a dramatic shift in the atmosphere. Clearly, the movement exercise has done *something*, and the stage directions say that something strange has happened to the *obje*, but does not elucidate *what* (Okada 2015, 132). The other characters spend a few moments looking at the *obje*, and then Man begins to talk to the *obje* (and his father) about an embarrassing experience on his elementary school’s baseball team. While this monologue happens, Woman A, Woman B, and Man take turns holding the hose and spraying water on the *obje*, whose white exterior begins to melt off, revealing a wooden interior. The water from the hose streams in a gentle arc. The characters use the hose sporadically, raising it to the *obje* and then bringing it down, or handing it off to one another with no seeming pattern. I note the quality of the water and how the characters use it because it is important to understand that this moment is not a violent moment. The characters are not blasting the white surface away. Rather, the *obje*’s white surface drips off in gooey clumps, slowly, intermittently, and slitheringly.

Many reviewers read this as a moment of liberation, as Japan and Korea rejecting U.S. hegemony, and in a way they are. However, as Morii (2015, 59) points out, everything in the play is *part of* Japan’s (and Korea’s and Taiwan’s) imaginaries. It is not as if the U.S. is “outside” of these countries and can be cast off easily; historical cultural, economic, and military

relations have shaped all three countries, intertwining their histories, not to mention the U.S.' ongoing hegemony with international trade. Rather, Morii describes the breakdown of the *obje* as disturbing – even grotesque – yet entrancing; the audience cannot look away even as those gooey, slithering clumps discomfort them. Due to this, Morii invokes Kristeva's (1982) abjection to illustrate how the melting *obje* is a moment that disrupts identity and order, where borders become blurred and meaning as we know it collapses. However, I would say that any feeling of discomfort is limited to the moments when the *obje* melts; the *after* is not meant to be horrifying or violent like many of Kristeva's traditional examples (such as corpses). For Morii, this moment allows the audience a moment to break from, or at least think about, a space outside of U.S.-led hegemony. However, after the *obje* is completely washed of its white veneer, it is not *gone* but rather the stage directions state that the *obje* is "greatly changed" (Okada 2015, 134). It clearly does not have the same power it did at the start of the show, and does not answer Man's question "Dad, do you hear me?" (134), but it is still there, and the characters have a new relationship to it.

I would offer an interpretation of this new relation, but the play frustrates any attempt to pin down *what* the new relation is; its indeterminacy is the important point. Before any definitive statement can be made on the change, Woman B reminds the audience that this is not real, but an imagining. The play ends, however, on a hopeful note as Woman B says: "But someday that corresponding reality will appear. That's what I imagine." (Okada 2015, 134). The play does not provide a concrete solution but providing *one* solution would inevitably be too simplistic. The reason the show does not provide one solution is because fixing the current situation is like changing the air we breathe. In the *Bijutsutechō* interview, Okada (2015) stated that he wanted the play to have the sense of going outside the reality we are in and to imagine the plasticity (or mouldability) of reality. Though stepping outside reality may be so unfathomable that Okada cannot imagine what it looks like, it *is* possible, because everything holds potentiality for change, no matter how fixed it seems.

However, this ability to imagine and go outside reality is not disconnected from the body; rather, *God Bless Baseball* envisions imagining as an active, corporeal process. Woman B was not able to affect change in the *obje* until she *moved* and went back to the movement exercise. This may not provide a clear answer, but rather embody a question: How can we imagine a movement that changes everything we thought we knew? It is not an answer, but an encouragement to pose the question. However, what I would underscore is, the play is an encouragement to pose the question by moving through digital networks; not in a utopian, uncritical way, but by recognizing that the adjustments our bodies make to the current situation include digitized movement. Rather than transnational bodies stuck in globalization or metonymies (substitutions) of contemporary global affect (Uchino 2009, 143), the characters are transnational bodies formed by digital movement across borders – and by going back to these networks, framing them in a different way, they find a way to pose the question.

## Conclusion

### *Death Note*, Glocalization, and the Power of Fan Performance

Throughout this dissertation, I have focused on transnational fan performances that circulate within K-pop and anime media ecologies: reaction videos that become affective currency within K-pop, musicals and parody groups that illustrate the crossings of Asian American K-pop fans, fan-made dating game parodies that utilize anime tropes to imagine a potentially better future, and the looping bodies of baseball fans that probe the limits of U.S. cultural imperialism. All these case studies form a picture of an ever-moving and shifting network of K-pop and anime fandom that identifies as transnational, performs as transnational, and debates what it means to be transnational in relation to intersecting identities of gender, race, and nationality. Corporeal movement is key to how these performances and debates circulate, play out, and change the way fans envision their position within K-pop and anime, showing how movement itself is a critical component in globalized media ecologies.

For my conclusion, I turn to a brief case study and look at transnational fans' reaction to the 2017, live-action, English-language Netflix adaptation of the anime *Death Note*, to reflect on one way fan performances can possibly change or shift industry practices. Netflix's *Death Note* transferred the story and the setting from Tokyo to present-day Seattle and featured a nearly all-white cast. Fans largely panned the film, critiquing its casting, racial politics, aggressive heteronormativity, and story changes. My reflection and analysis here is not about passing judgment on the film or its quality, but rather to consider Netflix's *Death Note* as a flashpoint within global anime fandom that shows transnational fans' rejection of a transmediation that was supposedly meant "for them" (as in, an adaptation specifically for U.S. audiences, but one that reached Netflix users around the globe) and their expectations of a transnational text. This example brings up localization as an important issue within transnational transmedia that deserves further study. Localization is the process of translating and adapting a property for another market (such as localizing a Japanese manga into English), and within global media, this is also called "glocalization," which is the process of developing and distributing a product for global consumption but adapting it for local markets (such as the multiple, country-oriented versions of *The Voice*, an international, reality TV singing competition franchise) (Wodack 2010; Yiu and Chan 2013). Importantly, glocalization anticipates and formulates an audience; it is not simply a matter of making a product "local," but rather defining and re-defining what that local is, and in traditional glocalization practices, audiences are defined through a national lens. Transnational fans' reactions to *Death Note* illustrate shifts in thinking about localization that show a desire to take the local and global into account at the same time. In critiquing the Netflix *Death Note*, fans' performances assert their identity as transnational and reject nationalistic models of glocalization.

### **Death Note as Transnational Object**

Though *Death Note* has been adapted into many forms, the core plot remains the same. Protagonist Light Yagami is a charismatic genius, bored with his daily high school life. One day he finds a notebook on the ground, which he soon discovers has the ability to kill anyone by writing their name in the notebook, so long as the holder knows the person's real name and what

they look like.<sup>1</sup> In this world, death notes belong to *shinigami* (death gods). Light's death note was dropped by a *shinigami* named Ryuk, who wanted to see what would happen to a death note in the human world. Light decides he will use the death note to rid the world of "bad" people (i.e. those deemed criminals) and comes to believe he is the only person smart enough to usher in an era of peace in the world. The seemingly random murders draw the attention of the Japanese police, the general public (who nicknames the killer "Kira"), and the eccentric, international detective "L," who is the same age as Light and also a genius. What follows is a game of cat-and-mouse as Light and L try to outsmart each other, with L trying to prove that Light is Kira, and Light trying to find out L's real name.

*Death Note* was originally published as a manga, written by Ōba Tsugumi and illustrated by Obata Takeshi in *Weekly Shounen Jump* from 2003 to 2006. An anime (2006) quickly followed, along with soundtracks, light novels (books targeted at high school age readers, often with some illustrations), video games, six live-action films (five Japanese adaptations—three of which were also screened in U.S. theaters—and the U.S. Netflix adaptation), a live-action TV drama, and a musical, which has had several transnational iterations. The musical was first staged in Tokyo in 2015, but there was also a 2015 Korean production (translated into Korean, with a Korean cast, including well-known K-pop star Kim Junsu in the role of L), a run in Taiwan in 2017 (with the original Japanese cast and Chinese subtitles), Russian concert versions (2017 and 2020), and as of this writing, there is an English-language version in the works.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars have noted the various ways *Death Note* as a property represents *transition* technologically, transnationally, and culturally within anime subcultures. Media scholar Uno Tsunehiro (2008) positions *Death Note* at an important turning point within anime and otaku subcultures in Japan. Uno builds off of Miyadai Shinji's conception of "world type" anime, which is a narrative framework or set of semantics<sup>3</sup> that emphasizes the resolution of "personal mystery" or regulation of the self as the resolution of mysteries in the world (Miyadai 2011, 247). Miyadai theorized this concept around anime in the 1990s, with *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) being a prime example. *Death Note* and other anime around its timeframe represent a shift in semantics to the "Battle Royale type,"<sup>4</sup> or stories depicting "ruthless dog-eat-dog struggles based on the neoconservative worldview" (quoted in Miyadai 2011, 247). The ideology spread by these types of stories regulates the self but does so through external battles with other people and the pursuit of "justice" at any cost.

Though Uno theorized the Battle Royale type within a Japanese cultural context, *Death Note* resonated with transnational audiences as well.<sup>5</sup> Japan studies scholar Alisa Freedman

<sup>1</sup> There are many other specific rules for using the death note, and throughout the series, Light demonstrates his genius by figuring out clever ways to exploit these rules.

<sup>2</sup> The musical *Death Note* was a transnational collaboration from its inception. Though produced by Japanese company Horipro, Frank Wildhorn wrote the music, with lyrics by Jack Murphy and book by Ivan Menchell. The show's development took place in New York City with all the songs in English and an American cast of actors before going on to full production in Japan.

<sup>3</sup> In Miyadai's formulation, the term "semantics" follows the work of Niklas Luhmann and is "a set of concepts and statements that enable communication within a social context" (See Miyadai 2011, 231).

<sup>4</sup> *Battle Royale* is another Japanese transmedia property about an alternate version of Japan that won World War II. In the story, the fascist Japanese government randomly selects a third-year class of junior high school students and forces them to compete in a fight to death. Originally written as a novel by Takami Kōshun, its 2000 film adaptation is perhaps most well-known.

<sup>5</sup> *Death Note* also garnered an infamous reputation because of worldwide reports about the anime and manga inciting peer bullying (involving students in various countries making their own "death notes"), which led to bans

(2016) positions *Death Note*'s transnational circulation in the context of internet fan activities. The manga series ran from 2003-2006 and the anime from 2006-2007, and Freedman notes this timeframe as a transitional period during which physical and print media were still central in the manga and anime industry, but also as a time when online fan activities began to gain recognition as a driving force for transnational spread: "*Death Note* exemplifies how the Internet has changed the relationship between fans, corporations and governments, and how mainstream trends are now being globalized more by fans than by commercial efforts" (33). Through fan scanlations (fan-made scans and translations of manga, from Japanese into many other languages), video sharing, and social media, Freedman maps *Death Note*'s global popularity onto the upswing in transnational anime fan activities online. Though the story is set in Japan, Freedman also notes the transnational themes within *Death Note*'s story as well; the major characters L, Mello, and Near (Mello and Near appear in the second half of the story) represent international policing forces, which gestures toward questions about transnational law enforcement collaborations (though the anime does not discuss that topic deeply).

Therefore, *Death Note* represents several turning points within the anime industry, conceptually with its worldview and technologically with the shift to online transnational fandoms. However, I would like to note that *Death Note* is not an "odorless" global object (Iwabuchi 2002). Earlier theorizations of global anime focused on texts that did not emphasize a Japanese cultural identity (or were glocalized to take them out) and were malleable; essentially, they could be transformed to appeal to local audiences and that is what made them global (Iwabuchi 2002; Allison 2006). *Death Note* is transnational. It is set in a particular place in Japan (Tokyo), yet reflects a globalized youth culture that feels restless, powerless, and in constant competition, much like the characters in Okada's *God Bless Baseball*. As fan reactions to the Netflix adaptation will show, fans embrace *Death Note* as an already transnational object, and they expect adaptations of it to take into account the intertwining of the local and the global in relations to its themes on policing and justice.

### Fan Reaction to Netflix's *Death Note*

Netflix's *Death Note* reimagined the story in present-day Seattle, with Light Yagami becoming Light Turner, played by white actor Nat Wolff. While some film critics were divided as to the success of the film, fans overwhelmingly panned it, turning it into a "drink along" for their podcasts (*Anime Feminist* 2017) or calling it "sad bad," as in, just plain bad and not entertaining bad (*Nerds of Color* 2017). I argue that a large part of Netflix's *Death Note*'s failure (in the eyes of anime fans, its core audience) had to do with its lack of fandom performance. I should note that when I say this, I do not mean that the Netflix *Death Note* simply needed to incorporate superficial nods to fandom, but rather that it refused to consider the conversations that have been evolving in transnational anime fandom for years, regarding strategies for localization involving casting decisions, race, and attentiveness to social issues. In criticizing the Netflix adaptation, fans isolated three problems with it: first, the lack of an equal relationship (or any relationship) between Light and L, and therefore not recognizing queer dimensions of the text; second, alterations to Light's character, making him unrecognizable from earlier iterations of *Death Note*, which was intimately tied with the choice to cast a white actor; and three, the

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or attempted bans within certain countries or states. There was also a murder case in Brussels that involved a note found attached to the body that read, "I am Kira" (Freedman 2016, 37).

whitewashing of the film, or the predominantly white cast (although the major role of L is played by Black actor Lakeith Stanfield).

To illustrate fandom response to these issues, I will focus on a podcast episode from fan website *Anime Feminist* where hosts Amelia, Dee, and Vrai analyzed Netflix's *Death Note* to represent disparate fandom conversations around this film. Dee and Vrai are from the United States, and Vrai self-identifies as genderqueer and autistic. Amelia hails from the United Kingdom and is mixed race. So, while they do not represent fans from a wide range of locations, their analysis shows the ways they take their multiple positionalities into account. In this conclusion, will focus specifically on the hosts' commentary about race in the film, though it should be noted that they talk about many other aspects, including representations of gender and sexuality.

First, they tackle the issue of whitewashing in the film, which is the practice of casting white actors in roles for characters of color, such as casting Mickey Rooney as a Japanese character in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). While this practice has a long history within Hollywood, more recently media fans have launched protests of Hollywood's whitewashing characters in remakes of Asian or Asian-inspired properties in particular. Before watching *Death Note*, the *Anime Feminist* hosts point to M. Night Shamalayan's 2010 live-action adaptation of the animated show *Avatar: the Last Airbender* (2005-2008; henceforth *ATLA*) as a prime example of whitewashing. *ATLA* is set in an Asian-inspired fantasy world, with Asian characters as its leads, whereas Shamalayan's adaptation cast three white actors as the white leads. It is apropos the hosts bring up this example, as *ATLA* also arguably sparked contemporary fan activism around whitewashing in Hollywood. In 2009, fans of the show formed the website *Racebending.com* to protest the live-action film, which inspired further protests around whitewashing and overall heightened awareness of the practice within younger audiences (Lopez 2011). The formation of *Racebending.com* not only demonstrates fans' awareness of racial casting issues in adaptations, but also gestures to its roots in fandoms for Asian media and how anime adaptations continue to be a hotspot for fan activism and debate.<sup>6</sup> However, what Lori Kido Lopez (2011) highlights as significant is how fans' activist and organizational skills around *Racebending.com* were developed within the context of fandom, through community discussions and producing fanworks. Through their continued performances and engagements with Asian media, fans continually question their role as consumers of this media and what power they hold to change industry practices, which is why discussions like the *Anime Feminist* podcast are powerful; they are fannish performances that also inform further organizational, activist efforts.

While fans initially questioned casting a white lead as Light Yagami, they recognized that the social commentary within the anime could open space for specified commentary on race relations in the United States. Co-host Dee comments prior to watching the movie that while the whitewashing arguments are valid, casting Light Yagami as a white man might make sense in an American context: "The whole point of Light is that he's this upper-middle-class average man, with all these entitlements, who kind of feels like he can do whatever he wants. And if you're gonna map that into America, I think a white kid is probably the way to go" (2017). The original incarnation of Light Yagami is symbolic of normative perfection, or the top of the social hierarchy; he is an extremely privileged character, who happens to have a God Complex. What better way to portray that character type in an American context than with a privileged, white

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<sup>6</sup> Fan protests against whitewashing have continued as more live-action anime adaptations starring white actors come out, such as in *Dragon Ball Z* (2009), *Speed Racer* (2008), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017).

male character?<sup>7</sup> (Though, it is worth noting, the hosts also argued for casting a Japanese American as the lead, who could then wrestle with pressures of being a model minority.) *Nerds of Color* (2017), a fan blog that writes about race and media, echoed similar sentiments showing that while fans are vigilant toward whitewashing in media, they are also aware of racial politics within their cultures and how racebending Light's character could serve the narrative in an American context.

However, for Dee and the other co-hosts on *Anime Feminist*, after watching the film it became abundantly clear that casting a white lead meant that their hopes for more nuanced social commentary would never come to fruition. As Amelia says, "What's happening is that putting a white guy at the head of this story meant they needed to make him sympathetic; they needed to make him worthy of redemption; and they needed to make it possible for viewers to absolve him of as much guilt as possible" (2017). In *Death Note*, Light is a mass murderer, and this does not change in the Netflix version; what changes is the film's impulse to forgive him for these actions. Or rather, as the co-hosts joke, the filmmakers "*Light-washed*" the role, in order to make "straight cis white guys watching it feel good about their murderous intentions" (Amelia 2017). In order to garner sympathy for Light, the film turns Light into a social misfit at his high school, who is picked on and does other students' homework in exchange for money. He has a strained relationship with his police detective father due to his mother's murder the year before, which fuels his desire to wipe out the "bad guys" (rather than being fueled by his ego). He is manipulated by both Ryuk and his girlfriend Mia, a Lady Macbeth-type who pushes Light to kill more and more people with seemingly no motivation other than that she is bored. By casting Light as manipulated (rather than *manipulative*) and misunderstood, he becomes a sympathetic protagonist the audience can root for, misguided and well-intentioned, despite murdering a whole lot of people.

*Anime Feminist* connects the way making Light white and sympathetic acts as cover for the violence he inflicts on people of color in the film. After Light kills two white bullies who had terrorized him, the rest of his victims in the film are all people of color from around the globe, such as members of ISIS and a character that is essentially Kim Jong Un, in addition to numerous brown people who are not given a name or organizational affiliation. Light also intentionally chooses the name "Kira" because it is a Japanese name, which means that the FBI think the killer is Japanese (because, as the hosts sarcastically point out, there are apparently "no Japanese people in America"). Vrai argues that Light *choosing* his name and purposely making it tied to another race and ethnicity is "uncomfortable," because the implication is that Light is masquerading as another race and using people of color for his own personal gain. Whereas in the anime, the name Kira is bestowed upon Light by the general populace, making him a symbol of the people.

I would also like to note that this moment on the podcast is one of many where the hosts note their discomfort with the film, their bodily reactions serving as a moment of critique and springboard into further articulations. Though this fan performance is aurally experienced, unlike my other case studies that rely on visuals, the hosts mix in their bodily reactions with verbal

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<sup>7</sup> There were fans that immediately rejected the idea of a white Light, particularly those who pointed out racist casting policies surrounding the film. Asian American actor Edward Zo and self-proclaimed *Death Note* fan made a 25-minute YouTube video explaining how he was not even allowed to audition for the role because the role of Light was going to a white actor. For him, the film is automatically whitewashing because it followed in the Hollywood tradition of denying Asian American actors roles that could potentially be for them, because the source material is Asian.

critique, both informing the other. The whole podcast is framed as a fan reaction, as the hosts start the episode before watching the film. They give their initial thoughts prior to watching the adaptation, and then come back after having seen the film.<sup>8</sup> So, while not simultaneous with watching the movie, the podcast combines immediate reactions with long-form discussion, and throughout the episode they point to the ways their bodily reactions gave them cues to upsetting or problematic parts. In the moment that Amelia brings up Light choosing the name Kira, she notes it was “*very uncomfortable*” (her emphasis), and Vrai jumps with the exclamation, “Oh my god, I died!” The three hosts bounce off one another with several reactions for a few moments—another memorable reaction coming from Vrai: “My skeleton un-zipped my flesh suit and it ran away during that line”—before Amelia tops the moment off by reiterating, “it was very uncomfortable.” Therefore, just because this podcast does not visually show physical bodies in space, their corporeal movements and reactions inform their analysis and each other, showing how the full body analysis I explored in Chapter One can loop and spiral into longer-form fannish discussions.<sup>9</sup>

The inattention to specific, racial issues also extends beyond Light. In another scene, L accuses Light of being Kira, and Light’s father (a police detective) violently puts L (a Black man) into a chokehold. There is no follow-up or additional commentary in the film to this scene, which is another moment Dee describes as “*real uncomfortable*” (emphasis hers) given of the long history of police violence against Black people in the United States and the more recent formation of the Black Lives Matter movement. For fans, this glaring misstep to discuss police violence against Black people both failed to address a national and global issue and missed a core theme of the anime, which questions methods of policing and definitions of justice.<sup>10</sup> Throughout their critiques around race, the hosts draw out how the film uncritically reinforces both local and global histories of white supremacy. As Amelia says, making Light white “feels like a way to make it a very white man’s story, but not in a way that actually says anything about whiteness. Not directly. [...] It says plenty about whiteness, none of it flattering, I assure you” (2017).

I detail part of *Anime Feminist’s* analysis here not to call out the flaws in the film, but to illustrate how layered their fannish critique is and to emphasize that these discussions that have been happening within transnational anime fandom for many years, as the hosts themselves note. What is important to me within this analysis, is that fans are performing their critiques within their positions as transnational fans. Their desires and expectations of localized anime adaptations are not simply a matter of caring if the story is set in their country, or if the adaptation perfectly replicates the prior iterations. For fans, the issues within the Netflix *Death Note* were not about the text being changed; fans were open to the story being adapted into a new setting, and for the most part, were open to Light being cast as a white character if it made sense within the social context of the film. Rather, their critiques stem from the fact that the entire film—in an attempt to “localize” the source material—pretended that racial issues did not exist in the United States and refused to acknowledge race, law, and justice as intertwined on a global scale.

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<sup>8</sup> Dee had already watched the film before the podcast, but Vrai and Amelia had not.

<sup>9</sup> Besides a reaction event, the hosts have also turned watching the film into a drink along. Or rather, they note that drinking—altering one’s bodily state—is the only way they can watch this film (this is because they had already heard some fan reactions and critiques on Twitter, so were preparing themselves).

<sup>10</sup> I should note that the hosts do critique the anime as well, for not going delving deeper into the inequities of Japanese policing system.

In questioning their own positionalities and taking larger, transnational fandom conversations around race and casting into account, fans expected the film to do the same. In terms of the impact these fan performances have, different situations will have different results; for example, the poor reception to M. Night Shamalayan's *ATLA* adaptation halted the planned sequels. At the time of this writing, there is a Netflix sequel to *Death Note* in the works, which means that despite fan backlash, the film was a large enough success to warrant a sequel (though Netflix confirmed that they had always planned on doing two films from the start). However, they brought in a new writer, Greg Russo, and he has already said that as a "fan" of the manga, he is drawing more from the source material than the 2017 film did (Ilyas 2021). In one way, Russo's comment aligns him with fandom, as he tries to assure fans that the story will be more recognizable to them and implies that he is aware of their criticisms and is trying to rectify mistakes from the previous film.

What form the story will take and how Netflix, Russo, and the team will ultimately localize the sequel is still a question, but transnational anime fans have made it clear that they expect adaptations of *Death Note* to consider the transnational social issues within the text and outside of it. This case study illustrates one direction that the transnational fan performances discussed in this dissertation can move in. Their performances reiterate the multiple localities transnational fans inhabit—expanding online networks of fandom; geographic locations that include the national, but also expand beyond it; numerous connections and cultural associations with Asia, Asianness, and Asian popular culture; and other intersecting identities—and shows how fans' movement through these localities can move or shift industry practices around the localization of global media, which redefines the notion of global audiences as a whole.

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