K-Pop and Koreaboo: A Feminist Analysis of the Racial and Sexual Politics of the Transnational Media Fandom

Min Joo Lee
Lily Chu
Inhye Irene Han
Ji Sun Jeon

At a South Korean (hereby Korean) popular culture convention held in Los Angeles, Lee, one of the authors of this paper, met a woman, who, after finding out Lee was Korean, asked her, "I am so in love with Korean men. How do I stop being so interested in them?" The woman appeared to be white, had long blond hair tied into a ponytail, and sported big round glasses. Her erotic interest in Korean men seemed to both excite and dismay her. She continued, "I know in my head that the Korean television dramas and music videos I watch are fictional, but I can't stop wanting to believe Korean men are actually like that [romantic]." Although she had never been to the country in person, due to its popular culture, she fantasized about traveling to Korea and meeting Korean men living in Korea (hereby resident Koreans) in real life. She is one of the many non-Koreans who consume Korean popular culture and express their interest in its men and culture.

Hallyu (also known as the Korean Wave or Han'ryu) refers to the transnational popularity of Korean popular culture and is arguably one of the most significant cultural phenomena originating from Korea in the past two decades. Beyond popularizing Korean culture, Hallyu has also generated significant economic and political impact, not just within Korea, but around the world. Hallyu fandom is comprised of fans of different races, gender, and sexual identities, but a certain subsection of fans has gained particular notoriety for their overzealousness. These fans acquired the nickname "Koreaboo." The Urban Dictionary (2019) defines the term as follows: "[…] They may also think that they will someday marry their favorite idol […] They could think

that all Asians/Koreans are beautiful gods who are above the human race (see also yellow fever).” This definition juxtaposes Koreaboos’ erotic desires for Koreans with the racialized erotic fetishes that define yellow fever (a term that refers to non-Asians who are exclusively attracted to Asians as sexual partners). However, in this essay, we contend that Koreaboos’ erotic desires are somewhat different from conventional Orientalism and Asian fetishism because rather than simply fetishizing Koreans as the racial and ethnic “Other,” some Koreaboos also desire to *become* Korean.

Many Koreaboos share social media posts about their affection for Koreans and Korean culture to form transnational connections with other like-minded individuals (Lee 2020b). In this essay, we examine the social media posts related to Koreaboos. We examine both the posts uploaded by Koreaboos, and the ones posted about Koreaboos by those who do not share their zeal for Korea. We utilize feminist theories on eroticism and feminist media theories to conduct critical analyses of these social media posts. We argue that, on the one hand, Koreaboos attempt to deconstruct problematic dating culture and gender norms in their respective countries by taking control of their erotic desires and practices. However, on the other hand, we contend that they reconstruct the problematic binary between the East and the West through their essentialist erotic desires for Korean culture and people. Our research contributes to feminist scholarship and praxis by examining the nuanced meaning of women’s erotic power. As we will extrapolate further in this essay, while women’s erotic power can disrupt the societal status quo and provide the initiative for forming a more egalitarian and equitable society, when women do not wield their erotic power within intersectional frameworks, it merely functions to repackage the existing cultural problems, namely racism and Orientalism, as superficial feminist empowerment.

During the inception of the term “Koreaboo,” it was only used among a small number of

fans to describe their affinity towards Korean culture and celebrities. Now, while the definition still contains these aspects, the term is more widely used than before. The terminology has expanded to become a phenomenon that garners more than four million views on YouTube and 2.2 thousand posts on Instagram. Furthermore, young Koreans and Korean entertainment companies create posts and videos to match the needs of Koreaboos because they have come to realize that "Koreaboo" is no longer just terminology that refers to a few avid Korean culture fans, but rather, is a cultural phenomenon with hundreds of thousands of participants from around the world.

The term "Koreaboo" has been used in various ways. Some K-pop artists have used camaraderie among Koreaboos to promote their own works. For example, a new artist actively promoted his work by using the Koreaboo hashtag and other related hashtags, such as #Korea and #KPOP, and asked the Koreaboo community to help him reach a million views for his music videos.[1] Meanwhile, others used the hashtag to facilitate collective action against pressing social issues. For instance, in light of the US troops' departure from Afghanistan, some Koreaboos used the #Koreaboo to report the current situation in Afghanistan, check the well-being of some Afghani Hallyu fans, and find ways to send them help.

The hashtag has such diverse functions, but the biggest theme related to the #Koreaboo focuses on the theme of dating. Content associated with the term ranges from advice videos on how to date a Korean to online posts seeking tips from other Koreaboos about dating a Korean. On TikTok and Instagram, avid Koreaboos post about their desire to visit the nation in order to meet Koreans and to learn the language in order to communicate and become an "insider" of

[1] We decided to anonymize the data that we gathered from social media. Although all of the social media posts we analyze in this essay are publicly accessible data, we are anonymizing them to respect the privacy of the individuals who uploaded the posts and to prevent them from getting unwanted attention or harassment.

Korean culture.

The term “Koreaboo” has both a positive and a negative connotation. While some Koreaboos remain respectful of each other by engaging in fruitful discussions about their favorite stars or about pressing socio-political issues in Korea and beyond, other Koreaboos use the term to spread unfounded myths and assumptions about Koreans and Korean culture. The usage of the term “Koreaboo” and its significance is growing and affecting hundreds of thousands of individuals around the world. However, there has been limited critical examination of this digital phenomenon among Hallyu scholars.

Hallyu’s rapid growth and success have compelled many scholars to focus their research on the questions: How was Hallyu able to gain such popularity? What attracts people to it, and what are the impacts of it? Some scholars examine Hallyu as a top-down process that arose due to government assistance and technological innovations. For instance, Eun Mee Kim and Jiwon Ryoo (2007) credit Korea’s rapid industrialization and growth of information technology as factors that allowed Hallyu to succeed. Other scholars have pointed to the Korean government’s support of the culture industries as the cause of Hallyu’s success (Kim 2015; Ryoo and Jin 2020). According to these scholars, Hallyu’s success is closely connected to the history of neoliberal globalization in Korea and around the world (Ryoo and Jin 2020; Kwon and Kim 2014).

Some politicians and culture critics espouse the bottom-up process to view Korean popular culture’s transnational success; they believe that Hallyu occurred because of the overwhelming sense of desire from Asians and Western fans alike for a different form of culture from that of the already-ubiquitous Hollywood (Western) culture (Cho 2011; Choi 2015). However, such sentiments risk falling prey to binary and culturally essentialist arguments. Furthermore, this interpretation of Korean culture simplifies it as a commodity to be consumed by non-Koreans.

Cultural simplification occurs especially in the "soft masculinities" portrayed by Korean male celebrities and fictional characters (Jung 2010). Also known as *kkonminam* masculinities, soft masculinities offer a feminized alternative to hegemonic notions of traditional hypermasculinity by centering romantic love and sexual restraint. Although such masculinities are by no means reflective of Korean masculinity in real life (Elfving-Hwang 2011; Song and Velding 2019), Koreaboos' obsession with kkonminam masculinities can easily be co-opted into Orientalist narratives that reiterate dichotomies between romance and sex, men and women, and East and West. While kkonminam masculinity is mostly embodied by male K-pop idols as their stage persona and by fictional K-drama characters, some Hallyu fans believe that actual Korean men embody soft masculinities (Elfving-Hwang 2011; Takeda 2014; Shim 2007; Lee 2020a). Through such beliefs about Korean masculinity, these fans affirm their racialized assumptions about Koreans as the ethnic and racial "Other" (Lee 2020a).

We contend, however, that rather than simply "Othering" Korean culture and its men, some Koreaboos want to become a part of the "Other" either by proxy, through interracial dating, or through "race-transitioning" whereby one undergoes surgery or changes in make-up and behavior to "transition" from one race and ethnicity to that of Korean. We found some of these desires displayed on various social media platforms. Our research analyzes Koreaboos' erotic desire for Korean men, as well as their obsession with "becoming Korean" through the framework of the racialized erotic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS: RACIALIZED EROTICS AND KOREABOO'S DESIRES

Racialized erotics help us understand Koreaboos in a nuanced manner. What exactly is erotics? It

is an ontological force that permeates the everyday experiences of people's lives (Lorde 1993; Barriteau 2014). According to Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, it is a "politics of difference, shaped by the imagination, and fueled by fantasies. Extending beyond sex acts or desire for sex acts, they are often flashpoints for multiplex social tensions" (Mankekar and Schein 2013, 9). Black feminist scholars have been foundational in establishing feminist theories on erotics (Lorde 1993; Miller-Young 2010). In particular, erotics has been defined as a source of power that women of color can harness to actively contest social stigma against their sexual bodies and desires (Lorde 1993; Miller-Young 2010; Williams 2010). For instance, according to Audre Lorde, "Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives" (1993, 90). Beyond Black feminist scholars, those who examine sexual minorities and Indigenous communities also define erotics as a concept that empowers the socially marginalized (Driskill 2004; Przybylo 2019). According to these scholars, erotics is the means through which to problematize social norms and reclaim a lost sense of self for individuals who want to no longer operate under what Lorde calls the "exclusively European-American male tradition," by which she refers to various forms of social inequality such as heteropatriarchy and racism (Lorde 1993, 91).

We agree that erotics can be a fundamental source of power to dismantle problematic social norms. In some ways, Koreaboos are also asserting their eroticism through their social media posts, and such acts can, to a certain extent, be seen as an empowering way through which Koreaboos, who are largely women, engage with their erotics against the social norms that stigmatize women's overt expression of their sexual and romantic desires. However, we also contend that their erotic desires are more complex and multifaceted. While they problematize

certain social norms and assumptions, concurrently, they reconstruct new forms of social norms through their erotics.

Erotics is often interpreted as a force that attracts individuals to each other, but it can also cause people's alienation from one another. For instance, Sharon Patricia Holland argues that "racism has its own erotic life" (2012, 107). She analyzes the concept of the erotic touch and how it is an act that can connect individuals to one another, but also one that brings to the fore the realization that individuals can never become one with each other. In erotic touching, the skin acts as both a contact zone and a barrier. The skin serves as the outermost barrier that defines individuals' separateness from each other.

Holland's theories can be more concretely conceptualized through the example of racial fetishes. Those who have racial fetishes may appear to break racial boundaries and become intimate with the racial "Other." In such relationships, people of different races touch each other's skin intimately. However, even as they touch each other, they cannot become a unified single entity free of barriers; they are two separate entities divided by their skin, the different life experiences derived from their race and ethnicity, and the racial stereotype held by the racial fetishizer. Hence, racial fetishes re-establish racial barriers and stereotypes rather than dismantling them altogether.

Granted, some people denounce the connection between racism and erotics. They argue that erotic choices are apolitical because they are equivalent to other mundane choices we make in our everyday lives, such as buying bread at a grocery store. Robin Zheng (2016) calls such claims the "mere preference" argument. People who espouse the "mere preference" argument reject the possibility of one's erotic choices being influenced by intersecting social structures and power dynamics; they claim their erotic choices occur serendipitously. It is not within the scope

of this chapter to examine the psychological motivations behind individuals' erotic choices. Furthermore, Zheng argues that the intentions behind individuals' erotic choices matter less than the outcomes of racial fetishes. In other words, it does not matter whether an individual is racially motivated to make their erotic choices; what matters more is whether the subjects of the racial fetishes feel stereotyped and are socially disempowered by the ways that the fetishizers treat them.

In this essay, we agree with Zheng that the motivations behind individuals' racialized erotic desires matter less than the potential repercussions of making those erotic desires come true. Hence, it is not our aim to delve into Koreaboos' psyche to determine whether they are racists for showing erotic interest in Korea and Korean men. Instead, the purpose of this essay is to examine how Koreaboos display their erotic desires to the rest of the world through their social media posts, how their desires are perceived by the rest of society, and what kind of consequences may arise due to their erotic desires.

Social media has quickly grown into an important cultural space for Hallyu fans who are spread out all over the world. The fans of K-pop and K-dramas from outside of Korea create online communities where they can meet other fans and foster feelings of belonging under a mutual interest for Hallyu (Yoon 2019; Shim 2007). Wonjung Min, Dal Yong Jin, and Benjamin Han (2019) and Jungbong Choi (2015) illustrate how Hallyu fans around the globe also create and bond within digital affinity spaces where they feel safe to express their interest for Hallyu.

We conducted digital ethnography by approaching the internet as a cultural form with specific online norms and values (such as hashtags, the "like" and "favorites" buttons, and the comment function) and as a cultural artifact that is an archive of the ways that individuals interact with digital space and communities (Ardèvol and Gómez-Cruz 2014). In particular, we

examined how digital media create opportunities for building transnational social relations among like-minded fans of Korean culture, which would have been near impossible prior to the advent of the internet (Kaur‐Gill and Dutta 2017).

We collected data from four different user-generated content websites: YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram. With each platform, we focused on searching for posts that included the term "Koreaboo," as well as specific hashtags, such as #koreaboo, #korean, #korea, #koreanboy, #datinginkorea, and #koreanboyfriend. During our research, we found that there is a digital media company called "Koreaboo" dedicated to promoting Korean pop culture. We excluded this channel from our search results because we were specifically searching for examples of the term "Koreaboo" being used as a descriptor for a certain type of Korean culture fan, rather than any usage of the word for commercial purposes.

For YouTube and Twitter, we searched the term "Koreaboo" and sorted the results by viewership and favorites, in order to ensure our data contained videos and Tweets that reached a large audience. We then analyzed the top twenty YouTube videos, and the top twelve Tweets, collecting data on their creators, the date they were uploaded, the number of views or favorites, and what country the videos and Tweets were uploaded from. We not only analyzed the videos and Tweets, but also collected popular or relevant viewer comments.

For TikTok and Instagram, we used other hashtags to search for posts related to Koreaboos. For TikTok, we initially noticed the #koreaboo was used almost exclusively to mock or criticize them, rather than by creators who self-identified as Koreaboos. However, we discovered some commonly used hashtags among the Hallyu fan community by searching through the pages of the TikTok creators who were dedicated to creating content about Korean culture or living in Korea. We found #korealife, #expatinkorea, #koreanmen, #datinginkorea,

#koreanboyfriend, #asianboyfriend, and #korea to be relevant hashtags used by fans who expressed Koreaboo-like desires and behaviors. We analyzed thirteen TikToks, collecting data on the creators of the TikTok, the dates that they were published, the captions, and the number of views and likes. We also gathered popular and relevant comments related to these TikTok posts. For Instagram, the #koreaboo was mostly used in posts sharing news about Korean celebrities in the entertainment industry. Alternative hashtags we searched that had related content were #koreaboocringe, #koreaboocringes, #koreaboomemes, #koreaboo_x, #koreabook, and #koreanboy. We analyzed eleven Instagram posts, and collected data on the creators of the post, the dates they were posted, the number of likes, as well as popular and relevant comments. In total, we collected fifty-six posts from the four social media platforms for our study.

FANS' MULTIFACETED DESIRES FOR KOREAN-NESS: MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE OR COPING WITH BROKEN DREAMS

The Koreaboos in our research described Korean/Asian men as nice, patient, cute, polite, romantic, and innocent. The ways that the Koreaboos described Korean men were consistent with previously conducted studies on how some Hallyu fans, particularly from outside of Asia, described Asian masculinity. For instance, in a study conducted by Kirsten Song and Victoria Velding (2019), they found that one of the most cited reasons for fans' interest in K-pop male bands was their ability to traverse multiple versions of masculinity, from kkonminam to *jim seung dol* (literally translated as "beast idols," the term refers to idols who are muscular and powerful like "beasts"). Young Americans used descriptors such as intelligent, short stature, soft spoken, hardworking, polite, nurturing, romantic, introverted, and willing to share feelings to describe Asian men (Song and Velding 2019; Wong et al. 2012; Lu and Wong 2013). These

commonly cited characteristics align with the traits that the Koreaboos in our study used to explain their attraction toward Korean men.

While such racial assumptions about Asian masculinity made them (erotically) undesirable in the past, they are now core reasons for Koreaboos' erotic desire for Korean men. The Koreaboos frequently explained their desire for Korean/Asian men by comparing them to white men. For instance, in one YouTube compilation video, a white woman says, "I am looking for an Asian boyfriend. Why? Because Asian boyfriends are a lot nicer than my white boyfriends… Anybody have any tips? Maybe I can get a nice Asian boyfriend from Korea, Japan, Taiwan, or Vietnam, or Thailand, or anywhere in Asia." A clip in the same video features another white woman saying,

> Compared to white guys, they [Korean men] are way cuter, and umm… I've always wanted a Korean boyfriend. Every time I see an Asian person in public, I kind of die on the inside because there is a possibility that they might be Korean and I just love Korean men and since I look really different to them and I'm white and I fit their beauty standards, they are going to worship me, they are going to love me like a goddess. I will step off the airplane from the U.S. and they'll all just turn around, and then I'll be walking through the airport and they'll all just swoon over me, will flock to me, and I don't know if I can handle that kind of attention.

Both clips show women comparing Korean men to white men, and using these comparisons to explain their love for Korean men *instead* of white men, describing them as "nicer" and "cuter." In some sense, the women are attempting to problematize the masculine status quo in their own cultures by actively challenging it in favor of alternative forms of masculinity. As Lorde argues,

by answering to their own desires outside of traditional European-American masculinity, the Koreaboos have the power to shape their own experiences and the world around them. However, in this case, they do so at the expense of perpetuating harmful and racist stereotypes.

The erotic desire Koreaboos have for Korean men is very similar to "yellow fever." However, we contend that they are different in one significant way. While "yellow fever" as a term refers to non-Asian's erotic preference for Asians, we observed many Koreaboos who took their attraction for Korean men a step further beyond just a racial preference. They acted upon their desire to actually travel to Korea to find a romantic partner. In other words, while the former simply indicates an erotic preference for a person of a specific race, the latter is a preference combined with a course of action. Furthermore, while many individuals with "yellow fever" do not necessarily distinguish between the Asian diaspora and Asians living in Asia (Chen 2020), Koreaboos clearly distinguish between the Korean diaspora and resident Koreans with a clear preference for the latter. For example, in one TikTok post, the creator displays screenshots of several Tinder profiles of Korean men and women living in Korea to show others how desirable they are. The commenters to this post expressed their desire to move to Korea by exclaiming, "This is your sign to move to Korea!" or "That's it, I'm moving to Korea after this global pandemic." Rather than seeking a Korean dating partner among the Korean diaspora, the commenters assumed that they had to move to Korea to find the perfect romantic Korean partner.

Many Koreaboos on social media defended their preference for Korean men or their extensive love for K-pop idols and K-drama stars through a discourse of feminist empowerment by saying their participation in Korean popular culture has helped them raise their standards for men. For instance, in a TikTok, the creator mocks Koreaboos by claiming that the key to getting a Korean boyfriend is "to lower your standards." He goes on to explain that not every Korean

man is like a K-drama protagonist or a K-pop idol. However, most commenters to this TikTok argued that they should not have to lower their standards and that their love for K-pop had helped them realize that they did not have to settle for a less-than-perfect partner. For example, one of the commenters said, “yeah no i’d rather be single [sic],” while another claimed that, “if my boyfriend doesn’t treat me like the main character of a k-drama I don’t want him [sic],” and “I’d rather have high standards than be unhappy with someone I didn’t want to be with in the first place.”

In some aspects, Koreaboos’ arguments align with Audre Lorde’s concept of the power of the erotic. Lorde (1993) claims women can derive power from making conscious decisions to achieve a deep sense of satisfaction, joy, and fulfillment, and that the erotic is a critical element in dismantling the social and political hierarchy situated in a white patriarchal power structure. While Koreaboos’ love for Korean pop culture has empowered them to “raise their standards” by seeking alternative forms of masculinity, their erotic desires are limited in their abilities to change society because their desires are also built upon a problematic status quo: racial stereotypes of Asian masculinity. The whiteness of the Koreaboo women complicates the dynamic beyond subversive erotic energy allowing them to reclaim power. These reclamations of power are for socially marginalized individuals to make their own meaning of eroticism against the colonial, heteronormative, and white supremacist sense of the erotic that was historically forced upon their communities. In the case of white Koreaboo women, their erotic desires are simultaneously motivated by challenging traditional and toxic forms of masculinity within their own cultures and communities, and racist fetishizations that further perpetuate historical patterns of Orientalism.

While social media platforms were places where Koreaboos and general Hallyu fans

could racially eroticize and fantasize about Korean men, it was also a place where they could attempt to understand the "realities" of dating Korean men, whether they turned out to be disappointing or fairytale-like happy endings. Some foreign women living in Korea used social media to share their erotic experiences in Korea. Prior to moving or traveling to the country, some Koreaboos would use the social media platform to ask these "successful" Koreaboos about their lived experience in Korea so that they could accurately prepare for their travel. For instance, a white woman from Belarus living in Korea with a Korean husband shares photos of her interracial relationship on her Instagram page. All of her content details various aspects of her glamorous lifestyle and relationship, creating a narrative of success in love while living in Korea as a foreigner and encouraging her followers that they can achieve the same dream-come-true lifestyle. In essence, she uses her entire Instagram page to market her life in Korea and her relationship with her Korean husband to her followers, who, based on the comments posted on her Instagram page, were mostly women from different parts of the world who were interested in dating Korean men in real life. For instance, in one of her posts, she encourages commenters to tell her what kind of stereotypes and expectations they have of Korea so that she can tell them the "truth" about Korea. She responds to her followers' questions, including ones that ask: "Korean guys prefer foreigner women over Korean women in dating. If you are fluent in Korean, does it improve your acceptance into life, dating, and marrying? [sic]" This social media influencer is just one of many white women in interracial relationships with Korean men, giving advice to other non-Korean women about how they could secure their ideal Korean boyfriends.

The fairytale-like romance stories that some Koreaboos shared on social media motivated other Koreaboos to continue their search for their perfect Korean partners. For instance, in an

Instagram reel, the creator, a white American woman, shows her own successful love story of traveling to Korea and meeting a former K-pop idol at a club, to finally getting engaged to him eight years later. Her story replicates the experience many Koreaboos fantasize about, as reflected in the comments: “This is literally a k-drama plot. Congrats!”; “Living the Wattpad dream”; “You completed your Y/N story.” Here, Wattpad refers to a platform in which many fans read and write fanfictions, and Y/N stands for “Your Name,” referring to a type of fanfiction in which the reader can insert their own name into the romantic story.

Some creators used their social media platforms not only to share their success stories of finding love with a Korean man while living in Korea, but also to show their daily lives in the country, and to provide tips for learning Korean and living in Korea. One such user is a white woman from Eastern Europe, who has 2.6 million followers on TikTok and 1.7 million subscribers on YouTube. She currently lives in Korea with her Korean husband. Her YouTube channel contains videos titled, “I am Korean? I live in Korea? How did I learn to speak Korean?” and “How we met/Our Love Story/Belarusian Korean Couple/ From Meeting at Age 14 to Marriage.” Her TikTok page mostly features videos of her and her husband performing various TikTok trends and answering fan questions about their relationship. Her TikTok videos primarily use the hashtags: #internationalcouple, #koreaboy, and #koreanboyfriend. Throughout her content, many of her fans comment words of encouragement and love for her relationship and express their hopes to achieve a similar romantic relationship by moving to Korea. Her large fan-base and positive reception to her posts indicate her ability to fuel fantasies of moving to Korea and dating Korean men. To other Koreaboos, her social media posts serve as evidence that a Koreaboo’s dreams of falling in love with a Korean man and becoming Korean can come true.

While some social media influencers essentialize Korean masculinity and romantic

relationships with Korean men by sharing stories of success in finding love with their ideal Korean boyfriends, others essentialize Korean men in negative ways by pointing out instances in which they experienced negative interactions with Korean men they dated. In a TikTok post, the creator, a white Welsh woman living in Korea, makes a list of "Things Koreans said to me that hurt me" in an attempt to refute Koreaboos' stereotypes of Korean men as "perfect" and kind. Her list includes statements such as, "Your face is pretty, but your body isn't, so I don't want to date you," and "I don't want people to know we're dating until you lose weight." The video serves to let other foreigners know that if they move to Korea to find a Korean boyfriend, they may not experience the most egalitarian gender dynamic. Many of the commenters applauded the video's message, questioning why people continuously idolize Korean men and criticizing Korean beauty standards.

In an Instagram reel, one creator coins a new term, "Khosting," for situations in which she meets a nice Korean man with no red flags, only to be "ghosted" (losing contact with love interests because they no longer respond to one's text messages and phone calls) soon after being asked a casual question of what she had for dinner. The comments are populated by others who share similar experiences, such as, "Lol interesting.. Is it only in Korea?" and "Yup, they just drop a smoke bomb and disappear! I stopped trying after 2 times that it happened."

"Ghosting" and harmful beauty standards exist everywhere in the world, but the above-mentioned social media influencers and the commenters portrayed negative traits of Korean men as unique to Koreans by creating terms such as "Khosting" that combine the words "Korea" and "ghosting" as if Korean men are the only group of men who "ghost" their dates. The creators of the above-mentioned social media posts presumably anticipated a happier ending to their racialized erotic fantasies and subsequent transnational travel to Korea; if they did not

have such anticipations, they would not be as disappointed as to share their failed intimate experiences with others via social media. Rather than seeing the disjuncture between their fantasies and real-life experiences as evidence of Korean men's nuanced and multifaceted masculinities, some social media influencers chose to use their experiences to essentialize Korean men through a negative lens.

Whether the Koreaboos' social media posts had positive or negative connotations, they all emphasized the Korean-ness of the men that the social media influencers were dating. In Edward Said's (1985) theory of Orientalism, he argues that Asia is a concept that is produced by the European imagination. While Koreaboos in our study who were living and dating in Korea may be sharing their stories to provide insight for other tourists looking to travel and date in Korea, they positioned themselves as experts on Korean men, society, and dating practices. Both the negative and positive dating experiences in Korea that some influencers shared implied that Korean men would provide unique dating experiences because of their Korean-ness. The creators of the posts contributed to Orientalist ideologies by claiming authority as white foreign women regarding matters of Korean dating culture and Korean masculinity.

The Koreaboos we examined for the purpose of this essay expressed desires centered around stereotypes of Korean men they drew from consuming K-dramas and K-pop. They shared stories of successes and failures in achieving a specific type of romantic relationship with Korean men while living in or traveling to Korea. Their content, reaching millions of audiences around the globe, allowed them to take ownership over their own sexual desires at the expense of essentializing and perpetuating racialized prejudice against Korean men. Our study of Koreaboo social media influencers was overwhelmingly dominated by white women from Europe and North America whose social media posts reinforced Orientalist agendas to create imaginaries of

East Asian men as the racial and sexual "Other." While many Koreaboos expressed their desire for Korean men, and, by extension, their desires to become Korean through marriage to a Korean, as we analyze below, others claimed they would racially and ethnically "transition" to become Korean.

Some Koreaboos not only appreciate but also appropriate Korean culture and identity. They do so by devising their own criteria of "Korean-ness" and following these criteria so that they can identify themselves as Korean. There were multiple instances where Koreaboos shared their desires to become Korean on their social media pages. For example, a female fan of TWICE, a female K-pop idol group, who identifies as a Koreaboo and includes the hashtag #koreaboo in her Tweets posted, "Sometimes I wish I was a Korean. It would be so great to be from the same country as our Unnies [literally translated as sisters; here, it refers to the female members of the K-pop group TWICE], I would understand their language and also be able to attend their live concerts and meet them! Life would have been so nice and different if I was a Korean." The sentiment of wanting to become Korean to interact with their favorite Korean celebrities was one that was echoed in other Koreaboos' social media posts as well. These Koreaboos seem to believe that they will have a higher chance to meet their favorite actors and singers and that they will be noticed by Korean celebrities only if they became Korean. In their social media posts, they would argue that simply going to Korea to meet their favorite celebrities is insufficient to gain their attention. Some posts brought up examples of other foreign fans who visited Korea to meet their favorite celebrities in person but failed. The avid Koreaboos, by discussing the homogeneity of Korean culture, argued that the only way for them to meet their favorite actors and singers and potentially date them was by becoming Korean. They argued that Korean men and women usually prefer to date other Koreans, and hence, they needed to become

Korean in order to increase their odds of dating their celebrity crushes.

While many Koreaboos over the past few years have expressed their desires to become Korean, they also believed that it was an impossible dream. However, in 2013, the appearance of a social media influencer from England named Owen Willis showed other Koreaboos that it may actually be possible for them to become Korean through extensive plastic surgery, fashion, and change in gender performance.[2] Owen, by using the term "race transitioning," garnered mainstream media attention. He claimed that he "race transitioned" after undergoing numerous surgeries to look like a K-pop idol (Jimin from the K-pop group BTS) and that he is now fully Korean.

The European media as well as news outlets around the world responded to his claims with criticism. There were also some Koreaboos that were against the idea of race transitioning by commenting, "Dude you need serious help [sic]." However, for some devoted Koreaboos, he raised an interesting possibility: Can one become Korean by having multiple plastic surgeries? For these Koreaboos, Owen was an inspiration: they posted pictures of themselves photoshopped to look more Korean (applying Korean-style makeup and photo filters) or images of themselves going through plastic surgery to "race transition."

Owen's claims raise a critical question of what "Korean-ness" entails and who gets to define it. Korea historically rejected multiculturalism while striving for a stronger mono-ethnic society (Chung 2019; Kang 2020). Perhaps Koreaboos' drastic actions to become Korean through race-transitioning may be interpreted as retaliation against their belief in Korea as a mono-ethnic nation. However, their attempts to appropriate Korean identity are problematic in multiple ways. Whereas Lorde claimed women could reclaim their lost sense of self through

[2] We are using a pseudonym to anonymize our data.

erotic power, the white Koreaboos' desires to become Korean cannot be interpreted as empowering in the way Lorde suggested.

Koreaboos' radical appropriation of Korean culture leads to misrepresentation of the culture and fosters false assumptions about it in ways that perpetuate Orientalism. An outsider misrepresenting a culture and its inhabitants for one's benefit (financial or otherwise) is the defining feature of cultural appropriation (Lalonde 2021; Han 2019). It may have been true that in the past, "Korean-ness" was defined by the notion of ethnic homogeneity, but the cultural conception of Korean-ness in the contemporary era attempts to decenter the notion of Korean ethnic "purity" (Oh 2020). For instance, in recent years, the Korean government and media are recognizing the problem of adhering to a sense of Korean ethnic purity and are implementing programs that promote cultural exchange and educational and legislative changes to create a more ethnically inclusive Korea (Jun 2014). However, the methods some Koreaboos use to appropriate Korean identity (e.g. cosmetic surgery and makeup) function to perpetuate the image of Korea as still mired in the outdated notion of Korean ethnic purity. Therefore, the type of Korean-ness that Koreaboos are trying to appropriate is one that is based on stereotypes of Korean identity.

Koreaboos are symbolic of the multidimensionality and transnational popularity of Korean popular culture. Despite some Koreaboos who engage in actions such as race-transitioning and culturally essentializing Korea, there are others who are driven by their love for Korea to become more engaged in learning about pressing social issues in the country. For example, in 2021, with the spotlight on the problematic culture of bullying in Korean schools and workplaces, many Koreaboos shared relevant Korean news articles on social media with other Koreaboos and debated the issue with each other. They not only educated themselves on

the issue but also discussed their own experiences and ways in which they could lead a movement against bullying. In this case, the Koreaboo phenomenon opened up transnational interactions and conversations through social media, brought about by their shared love for Korea, to discuss the pressing issues happening both in Korea as well as in their home countries.

CONCLUSION

Our analyses of Koreaboos raise the question: How are Koreaboos' actions perceived by native and diasporic Koreans, as well as by non-Korean Asians? We will conclude this essay by briefly examining the consequences of Koreaboos' erotic desires for Koreans and by discussing the broader feminist theoretical questions that Koreaboos' actions raise to the fore.

The majority of Koreaboos we observed in our research appeared to be white European and American women. When these Koreaboos appropriate Korean culture and identity, they maintain their white superiority. As shown in our data, some white women claimed that Koreans will automatically find white women beautiful and that "Asians will worship them" because they believed that Asian beauty standards are based on Asians' aspirations to become white. White Koreaboos who aspire to become Korean, are able to satisfy their desire to explore the exotic "Other," while diverting the oppression and discrimination that Asians face, and upholding the superiority of whiteness. Additionally, because these Koreaboos rely on stereotypes of Korean identity to appropriate Korean-ness, their actions further cause physical, mental, and emotional burden on those at the receiving end of the stereotypes (e.g. Koreans, and, more broadly, East Asians).

This brings to light an important point of discussion: Koreaboos' defense of their appropriation of Korean identity and culture. Many Koreaboos justify their cultural appropriation

by claiming that their appropriation serves as a positive exposure of Korean culture around the world. Proponents of Koreaboos' appropriation of Korean culture often argue that many resident Koreans have no problem with the appropriation of Korean culture by non-Korean individuals. They claim that resident Koreans have more authority in determining someone's Korean identity and their belonging within the boundaries of Korean-ness than diasporic Koreans who often find Koreaboos' cultural appropriations offensive and inappropriate. While a cursory analysis of social media posts uploaded by resident Koreans did seem to align with the claim that they generally do not find Koreaboos problematic, a closer examination reveals that they fail to understand the effect Koreaboos have on shaping the perception of Korea in the West and the racial power dynamics at play. The most significant difference between the reactions of resident Koreans and diasporic Koreans to Koreaboos is that the former individualize the phenomenon of Koreaboos and view Koreaboos as individuals who make certain choices that impact their own lives, whereas the latter view Koreaboos as a collective and a social phenomenon that impacts not only Koreaboos' own lives but also that of others.

Justifying Koreaboos' actions by pointing to the nonchalance of resident Koreans is harmful because it posits resident Koreans as more credible than diasporic Koreans, establishing an intra-Korean hierarchy regarding one's legitimacy to set the boundaries of Korean-ness. Furthermore, within the debate surrounding Koreaboos' desires to become Korean, who gets to decide whether and which Koreaboos can legitimately define themselves as culturally Korean? Do ethnic Koreans, just because they are Korean, get to decide who is a "real" or "fake" Korean? Such distinctions between "real" and "fake" Koreans, in addition to hierarchy based on geographical location, lead to dangerous territories of xenophobia and racism.

Questions remain: Should non-white Koreaboos be similarly criticized as white

Koreaboos? Among the Koreans who accept Koreaboos, is there a preference for white Koreaboos over Koreaboos of other races? What racial politics are at play with Asian, Latinx, Black and Indigenous Koreaboos? How do their own racial dynamics with whiteness influence their exploration of Korean identities, and what too, are the consequences of their actions? How do East Asian Koreaboos, who are similar to Koreans in appearance but ethnically different, explore Korean identity, and what are the consequences of their actions? While we were unable to gather sufficient data from non-White Koreaboos, it is an aspect that merits further research in the future.

Our data exemplifies not only the impact of Koreaboos' appropriation of Korean identities, but also showcases the impacts of their desires for Korean men. From a Koreaboo's perspective, one of the main aspects of attraction for Korean men is their perceived hyperfemininity, which serves as a sharp contrast to white hegemonic masculinity. While Koreaboos praise Korean men for their femininity, their behaviors of "escaping from the West" and traveling to Korea to indulge in Korean men not only reinforce the notion that Korean men and their sexuality is "Other" to these white women, but also reinforce the notion that the heterosexual attraction for East Asian men and their effeminacy has no place in the Western world and can only take place far away from the Koreaboos' home countries.

Then, is it possible to imagine an alternative, non-Orientalizing, non-objectifying form of desire for Korean masculinity? According to Lorde, erotic oppression occurs when "we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and differences" (1993, 91). If white Koreaboos are using Korean soft masculinity as a form of escape from their hegemonic, heteronormative masculinities to satisfy their need for alternative masculinity, it is a form of erotic oppression

rather than erotic empowerment. A form of eroticism that does not reaffirm harmful cultural stereotypes, and provides power in the pursuit of self-affirmation against this racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society is perhaps an unrealistic but desirable utopic feminist vision.

Due to the limitations of our data, we do not claim that the observations and arguments we make in this essay can be comprehensively applied to all Koreaboos and Korean popular culture fans, especially queer and/or fans of color. Instead, we contend that we explore a small yet significant subset of Korean popular culture fans and their erotic desires for Korean men and Korean-ness.

Our research findings raise some significant questions regarding the issue of cultural belonging and cultural boundaries. Koreaboos' erotic desires as well as the debates surrounding their desires provide important points of departure to examine the politics surrounding cultural belonging and affiliation. Where do we draw the line between criticizing cultural appropriation and cultural gatekeeping? What does it mean to be Korean and what are the boundaries of its cultural affiliation? These are questions that can and should be further addressed in future feminist research.

Works Cited

Ardèvol, Elisenda, and Edgar Gómez-Cruz. "Digital ethnography and media practices." *The international encyclopedia of media studies,* 2014, 7:498-518.

Barriteau, Violet Eudine. "A (Re)Turn to Love: An Epistemic Conversation between Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" and Jonasdottir's "Love Power"." In *Love A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Anna G. Jonasdottir and Ann Ferguson. Routledge, 2014, 77-96..

Chen, Xu. "Dating, digital media, and diaspora: Contextualising the cultural uses of Tinder and Tantan among Australian Chinese diasporas." Queensland University of Technology, 2020.

Cho, Younghan. "Desperately Seeking East Asia Amidst the Popularity of South Korean Pop Culture in Asia." *Cultural Studies* 25 (3), 2011:383-404.

Choi, JungBong. "Hallyu versus Hallyu-hwa: Cultural Phenomenon versus Institutional Campaign." In *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, edited by Sangjoon Lee and Abe Markus Nornes. University of Michigan Press, 2015, 31-52.

Chung, Erin Aeran. "Creating hierarchies of noncitizens: race, gender, and visa categories in South Korea." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*:1-18. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1561061, 2019.

Driskill, Qwo-Li. 2004. "Stolen from our bodies: First Nations two-spirits/queers and the journey to a sovereign erotic." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16 (2), 2004, 50-64.

Elfving-Hwang, Joanna. "Not so soft after all: Kkonminam masculinities in contemporary South Korean popular culture." 7th KSAA Biennial Conference. 2011.

Han, Hsiao-Cheng. "Moving from cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation." *Art Education* 72 (2), 2019, 8-13.

Holland, Sharon Patricia. *The erotic life of racism*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Jun, EuyRyung. "Tolerance, Tamunhwa, and the Creating of the New Citizens." In *Multiethnic Koea?: Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood Diversity in Contemporary South Korea*, edited by John Lie, 79-94. Institute of East Asian Studies, 2014.

Jung, Sun. 2010. *Korean masculinities and transcultural consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop idols*. Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

Kang, Jiyeon. "Reconciling progressivism and xenophobia through scapegoating: anti-multiculturalism in South Korea's online forums." *Critical Asian Studies* 52 (1), 2020, 87-108.

Kaur‐Gill, Satveer, and Mohan J Dutta. "Digital ethnography." *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 2017, 1-10.

Kim, Bok-rae. "Past, present and future of Hallyu (Korean Wave)." *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 5 (5), 2015,154-160.

Kim, Eun Mee, and Jiwon Ryoo. "South Korean culture goes global: K-Pop and the Korean wave." *Korean social science journal* 34 (1), 2007,117-152.

Kwon, Seung-Ho, and Joseph Kim. "The cultural industry policies of the Korean government and the Korean Wave." *International journal of cultural policy* 20 (4), 2014, 422-439.

Lalonde, Dianne. "Does cultural appropriation cause harm?" *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 9 (2), 2021, 329-346.

Lee, Min Joo. "Intimacy Beyond Sex: Korean Television Dramas, Nonsexual Masculinities, and Transnational Erotic Desires." *Feminist Formations* 32 (3), 2020a, 100-120.

---. "Touring the Land of Romance: Transnational Korean Television Drama Consumption from Online Desires to Offline Intimacy." *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 18 (1), 2020b, 67-80.

Lorde, Audre. "The uses of the erotic: The erotic as power." In *The lesbian and gay studies reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin, 339-343. Routledge, 1993.

Lu, Alexander, and Y Joel Wong. "Stressful experiences of masculinity among US-born and immigrant Asian American men." *Gender & Society* 27 (3), 2013, 345-371.

Mankekar, Purnima, and Louisa Schein. "Mediation and transmediations: Erotics, sociality, and "Asia"." In *Media, erotics, and transnational Asia*, edited by Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, 1-32. Duke University Press, 2013.

Miller-Young, Mireille. "Putting hypersexuality to work: Black women and illicit eroticism in pornography." *Sexualities* 13 (2), 2010, 219-235.

Min, Wonjung, Dal Yong Jin, and Benjamin Han. "Transcultural fandom of the Korean Wave in Latin America: through the lens of cultural intimacy and affinity space." *Media, Culture & Society* 41 (5), 2019, 604-619.

Oh, David C. "Representing the Western Super-minority: Desirable Cosmopolitanism and Homosocial Multiculturalism on a South Korean Talk Show." *Television & New Media*, 2020, 260-277.

Przybylo, Ela. *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*. The Ohio State University Press, 2019.

Ryoo, Woongjae, and Dal Yong Jin. "Cultural politics in the South Korean cultural industries: confrontations between state-developmentalism and neoliberalism." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26 (1), 2020, 31-45.

Said, Edward W. "Orientalism reconsidered." *Cultural critique* (1):89-107, 1985.

Shim, Doobo. "Korean wave and Korean women television viewers in Singapore." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 13 (2), 2007, 63-82.

Song, Kirsten Younghee, and Victoria Velding. "Transnational Masculinity in the Eyes of Local Beholders? Young Americans' Perception of K-Pop Masculinities." *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 2019, 1-19.

Takeda, Atsushi. "Japanese-Korean international marriages through the Korean Wave in Japan." In *The global impact of South Korean popular culture: Hallyu unbound*, edited by Valentina Marinescu, 35-46. Lexington Books, 2014.

Urban Dictionary. "Koreaboo." accessed 8/12/2021. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Koreaboo., 2019.

Williams, Linda. "Skin flicks on the racial border: Pornography, exploitation, and interracial lust." In *Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Sue Thornham, Caroline Bassett and Paul Marris, 71-105. Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Wong, Y Joel, Jesse Owen, Kimberly K Tran, Dana L Collins, and Claire E Higgins. "Asian American male college students' perceptions of people's stereotypes about Asian American men." *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 13 (1), 2012, 75.

Yoon, Kyong. "Transnational fandom in the making: K-pop fans in Vancouver." *International Communication Gazette* 81 (2), 2019, 176-192.

Zheng, Robin. "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2 (3), 2016, 400-419.