The Real K-Pop Idols of Fanfiction:

Reclaiming "Real Person" Fanfiction as K-Pop Industry Practice

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Abstract

RPF, or "real person fiction," is a genre of fanfiction that writes about real people rather than fictional characters. Over the past decade, the number of RPF works written about K-pop idols has steadily increased, but RPF remains a controversial practice even within fanfiction communities. The purpose of this thesis is to understand the influence of fictional media practices such as fanfiction in the construction of the celebrity text. This thesis compares three practices found in K-pop RPF to three practices found in the K-pop industry in order to argue that K-pop fanfiction writers and the K-pop industry perform similar practices in pursuit of broader fan desires. Ultimately, the K-pop idol embodies a new model of celebrity that consciously moves between the "public" and the "private" in order to generate affective value. This movement is grounded in images of the idol's physical body and given meaning through the idol group's network of interpersonal relationships. Thus, this thesis points to RPF not as a controversial practice but as evidence of a high degree of fan awareness regarding the nature of contemporary celebrity.

Abrégé

RPF, ou « real person fiction », est un genre de « fanfiction » dont les personnages principaux sont des personnes réelles. Au cours de la dernière décennie, le nombre d'ouvrages du « RPF » écrits sur le sujet des idoles de la « K-pop » a régulièrement augmenté, mais le « RPF » reste une pratique controversée même au sein des communautés de fanfiction. Le but de cette thèse est de comprendre l'influence des pratiques des médiatiques fictives telles que la fanfiction sur la construction du texte de célébrité. Cette thèse compare trois pratiques trouvées dans « K-pop RPF » à trois pratiques trouvées dans l'industrie K-pop afin de faire valoir que les écrivains de « fanfiction K-pop » et l'industrie K-pop pratiquent des pratiques similaires dans la poursuite de désirs plus larges des « fans ». En fin de compte, l'idole K-pop incarne un nouveau modèle de célébrité qui se déplace consciemment entre le « public » et le « privé » afin de générer de la valeur affective. Les images du corps physique de l'idole fonctionnent pour ancrer ce déplacement et le réseau de relations interpersonnelles du groupe d'idoles donne ce déplacement du sens. Ainsi, cette thèse indique que le « RPF » n'est pas une pratique controversée mais une preuve d'un degré élevé de sensibilisation des fans à la nature de la célébrité contemporaine.

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Introduction

Scenario 1: a lovably quirky girl with a pathological inability to stop blushing is forced by her mother to pay a visit to their new next-door neighbours. It turns out her new neighbours are members of the famous K-pop boy band known as EXO.

Scenario 2: a socially awkward brand designer is a huge fan of a K-pop idol known as Baekhyun and regularly sends him merchandise that he's designed. One day, he gets to meet the boy of his dreams.

Scenario 3: a misanthropic young man is forced by his mother to spend the summer helping out at her fancy guest house. She forgets to tell him about the new pool boy she's hired.

What do these scenarios have in common? They are all stories centred around two or more members of the K-pop boy band EXO. Scenarios 2 and 3 were taken from works of fanfiction ("Angels Wear Pink" and "'Til the Morning Sun You're Mine"), stories in which EXO fans re-imagine EXO members as something other than they are (or what they appear to be). Scenario 1 was taken from a web drama produced by SM Entertainment, EXO's record label and management agency. This web drama is called *EXO Next Door* and stars the members of EXO playing fictionalized versions of themselves. Each EXO "actor" shares the same name, job, and face as the EXO "character" he is playing. Actress Moon Ga Young rounds out the cast by playing a character who is essentially a composite of what the K-pop industry imagines EXO fans to be: young, female, and an avid fan of EXO to the exclusion of "real" responsibilities like getting a boyfriend or moving out of her parents' house.

The similarities between *EXO Next Door* and EXO fanfiction did not go unnoticed among K-pop fans. In a review for *Seoulbeats*, Chelsea writes, "If Got7's *Dream Knight* felt straight out of an OC (original character) fanfic, then *Exo Next Door* takes it to a whole other

level… Yeon-hee's life continues to whirl into a fanfic turned reality when her mother tells her she will be responsible for cleaning Exo's apartment. In true fanfic style, all the members take a special interest in their new cleaning girl…" For all the similarities in content, however, there is an extreme difference of form. As a piece of media produced (and therefore sanctioned) by SM Entertainment, *EXO Next Door* enjoys a status to which fanfiction works, particularly those based on "real" celebrities, cannot aspire. EXO fans who might feel compelled to hide the fact that they read and write fanfiction are encouraged by the K-pop industry to consume content like *EXO Next Door.* As a fanfiction work, however, *EXO Next Door* has little to offer. Chelsea writes, "As things stand now, both Chanyeol and D.O have somewhat developed a romantic interest in Yeon-hee – though all she's done is blush and dust random surfaces. Baekhyun has caught on to the blossoming love triangle, and Sehun remains oblivious – instead focusing his attentions on befriending her brother who makes a mean espresso. (But we all know if this was a *real* fanfic, it would be bubble tea.)" Chelsea here introduces an existential question for *EXO Next Door*: what is it? Is it fanfiction? Can an officially produced media work be "fan" fiction? What is "real" fanfiction?

Every year, Tumblr – a microblogging platform and social networking site that succeeded LiveJournal as the "main locus of online fandom activity" (Morimoto and Stein) – puts out a "Fandometrics" report, a compilation of the most popular topics discussed on the platform that year. In 2015, this report declared that "Larry Stylinson," a portmanteau of the names of One Direction members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, was "the number one 'ship' [relationship] on the site" (Riley). Between 2016 and 2017, Fandometrics reported that the amount of fanfiction about K-pop stars on Tumblr had gone up by 10 percent (Riley). In 2018, "Jikook" (Park Jimin and Jeon Jungkook, members of the K-pop boy band BTS) was one of the top five

most popular ships on Tumblr ("2018's Top Ships"). Of the top 100 ships that year, 17 were pairings between real-life people, and more than half of those were related to K-pop. At time of writing, the "K-pop" tag has 298,220 works on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), a "noncommercial and non-profit central hosting place for fanworks" and a major destination for posting and reading fanfiction ("About the OTW").

These are examples of the phenomenon known as "real person fiction," a genre of fanfiction that writes about "actual people, rather than fictional characters" ("RPF"). It has historically been a controversial practice even within fanfiction communities; just 13 years before "Larry Stylinson" became the most popular "ship" on Tumblr, Fanfiction.net banned all fanworks about real people from its platform (Riley). In the 2013 interview that accompanied the 20th anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, an ethnographic text on fans and fan practices, Henry Jenkins commented that he "was asked not to write about real person slash" by his subjects while he was working on the book (xxxiii). In her 2018 *Medium* article on RPF, Tonya Riley wrote that the genre continues to raise "murky questions of consent and ownership of public identity." A Reddit thread from the same year, titled "RPF's (Real Person Fics): How Do You Really Feel?", gives some examples of the common questions raised by the genre: Is it just creepy? Is it an invasion of privacy? Is it something you would want someone to do about you (and does that matter)? Is RPF different from simply fantasizing about celebrities in private? What if the celebrity sees it? Can they ask you to stop? Is there a fundamental difference between "real" celebrities and fictional characters? Is RPF a form of obsession? A form of stalking? Is it dehumanizing?

In the work that follows, I seek to complicate the question "Is RPF transgressive?" by investigating how the K-pop industry facilitates the conditions that make K-pop fanfiction

possible. In order to argue that the K-pop industry is complicit in the "fan-fictionalization" of its stars, I examine three major practices in K-pop RPF – the use of real names, alternate universes, and "slash" – and compare them to three major practices in the K-pop industry – the use of stage names, narrative concepts, and homoerotic fan service. What does RPF tell us about the relationship between fans and celebrities? What does RPF say about the nature of fandom? What does RPF reveal about the nature of K-pop and contemporary celebrity? Through an investigation of the fan and industry practices mentioned above, I argue that both RPF and the K-pop industry conceive of the celebrity as a "character." In this "character-oriented" worldview, affective connection (which I call "intimacy") is generated through a constant negotiation between the "public" and the "not-so-public." This negotiation is anchored by the celebrity's "character-image," which "enmeshes" fan desire through the production of interpersonal relationships.

By "K-pop industry," I refer to a network comprised of corporate entities (e.g. management agencies, record labels, advertising agencies, ICT companies, TV/film production companies, TV networks, etc.), the mass media, the idols themselves, and the South Korean state. Due to the multimodal nature of K-pop, this network is in constant expansion. In her book *K-Pop Live*, Suk-Young Kim writes of the "reinvention of K-pop artists, who transformed themselves from mere singers to all-around entertainers whose primary career goal was to gain popularity by excelling in all aspects of media performance, such as singing, dancing, being a charming guest on variety shows, and always presenting an attractive public persona, all under the constant scrutiny of the mediatized world" (2). I use the word "network" in the sense of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT), which is "conceived as a heterogeneous amalgamation of textual, conceptual, social, and technical actors" (Crawford 1). I deploy

"network" in the Latourian sense "in an effort to bypass the distinction between agency and structure"; although the collective or individual agent "can associate or dissociate with other agents," these "actants enter into networked associations, which in turn define them, name them, and provide them with substance, action, intention, and subjectivity" (1). By using this term, I recognize that while a single label like SM Entertainment does not have omnipotent power over individual idols and other labels, a major label can form associations that create certain effects in other labels and in the mass media. The mass media plays a crucial role in the dissemination of these effects. Moreover, in adopting a theory in which "being, knowing, and action are inextricably bound together in networks" (Krieger and Belliger 8), I bypass the question of whether the industry "intends" a certain meaning and suggest instead that the construction and perception of that meaning constitutes an act of agency in itself.

Other terms I use frequently throughout the thesis include "shipping," a term derived from the word "relationships" (Kowalska 211). *Fanlore* defines shipping as "the act of supporting or wishing for a particular romantic relationship," either "by discussing it, writing meta about it, or creating other types of fanworks exploring it" ("Shipping"). These relationships can be "canon" (already present in the source text) or exist only in fan imagination. I use the word "fanfiction" to refer to the practice of fans writing a work of fiction for other fans that takes a source text or a famous person as "a point of departure," but other quoted writers use abbreviations such as "fanfic" or "fic" or the more formal term "fan fiction" ("Fanfiction"). I occasionally use the term "fanfiction reader-writer" to convey the porous nature of the boundary between "producing" and "consuming" in fan work. In addition, the term "fanwork" refers to fanfiction, but also more broadly to fan practices such as fan art, fan music, meta, and cosplay

("Fanwork"). I use "fanwork" to refer to specific works of fan creation, and "fan work" to describe the creative process itself.

On the Archive of Our Own, the "K-pop" tag encompasses dozens of idol groups, each bearing its own network of approaches, agencies, and backgrounds. Given this fact, coupled with my ANT approach to the K-pop industry, this thesis focuses on the boy band EXO. If we return to Tumblr's Fandometrics, EXO was ranked as one of the most popular K-pop groups listed in the 2018 report, with three members ranking in the Top 10 on the list of most popular K-pop stars (Herman, "Tumblr Announces…"). Back in 2013, EXO was the first artist in over a decade to sell more than 1 million copies of an album in South Korea (Sun-min Lee); until 2019, every studio album that the group put out had sold more than 1 million copies (J. Lim). EXO was the first artist to hold a dome concert in South Korea, after the Gocheok Sky Dome was built, and sold out all 22,000 available seats (C. Hong). According to the official fan registry, their fandom currently numbers more than 4.58 million ("EXO-L"). Moreover, EXO is signed under SM Entertainment, long regarded as a major player in the K-pop industry (Suk-Young Kim 23).

Aside from this, however, I chose EXO because of my personal, long-standing familiarity with fanfiction works in the EXO fandom. As my basis, I draw upon Kristina Busse's methodology in her essay collection *Framing Fan Fiction*:

> My methodology is thus based on my own immersion in and familiarity with a large amount of material. I can draw conclusions from the tens of thousands of stories I've read, and I use them as a base to make some generalizations as well as to choose the stories I discuss in depth. I have tried to select specific texts that are both representative and exemplary. That is, while I may choose a given text for its literary and thematic features, these features tend to illustrate a particular

aspect of fan fiction within the fandom and the interpretive community built

around it. (3)

This is the approach that I have taken to selecting the fanfiction works I discuss in my thesis, which include but are not limited to the Archive of Our Own works "In the Territory of the Dragon King" by curledupkitten [chanyeol], "Phoenix" by unniebee, and "Trial and Error" by thesockmonster.

Of the almost 300,000 works tagged as "K-pop" on the Archive of Our Own, a mere 100 of them are written in Korean. As Olivia Riley notes in her thesis about the gift culture of fanfiction, the Archive of Our Own is dominated by English-speaking (Anglophone) fans (56). Even as the phenomenon known as "K-pop" becomes increasingly visible around the world, K-pop fans continue to distinguish between "domestic" (Korean) and "international" (non-Korean) fans. This distinction is based on factors like citizenship, language, and culture, all of which affect how fans engage with the idol group of their choice. It is common practice among South Korean entertainers to launch official "fan cafés" and "fan clubs," either through their own websites or through the portal site Daum (harmonicar). Paid fan club memberships guarantee fans access to weekly music show recordings, early ticketing for fan meetings, exclusive access to merchandise, early ticketing for domestic concerts, and exclusive content (e.g. photos, videos, and social media posts). However, these memberships often require a registration number or South Korean phone number, effectively excluding those who are not domestic citizens or foreign residents of South Korea. Therefore, "domestic" and "international" fans refer not so much to one's geographical location but to one's degree of access to one's object of affection.

This has become less the case as idol management agencies seek bigger markets abroad. In 2018, Big Hit Entertainment launched the platform WeVerse, a "global fan community

platform" where fans of all languages and locations could (theoretically) communicate with Big Hit's flagship boy band, BTS. However, cultural distinctions continue to abound. In a 2019 story on CTV News, Christy Somos wrote, "For Western audiences, getting tattoos, going on dates, smoking a cigarette or even cannabis may not be considered anything out [of] the ordinary for a performer – but in conservative South Korean entertainment culture – especially for idols, they are considered taboo and in the case of cannabis, illegal." These cultural differences can create conflict within the fandom; at best, they contribute to the perception that there is a divide.

This thesis focuses primarily on the Anglophone subset of "international" EXO fandom. This is not to suggest that "domestic" fans do not engage in practices like writing fanfiction: in the hit 2012 drama *Answer Me 1997*, a mainstream portrayal of 1990s fan culture in South Korea, the protagonist's ability to write "slash fan fiction earns her special admission to a creative writing program that leads to a career in television screenwriting" (Cho 2322). However, this thesis investigates how fans and industries bring fictional media fan practices, such as fanfiction, into conversation with "traditional" models of celebrity. I am interested in viewing the celebrity text through the lens of fictional media fandom practices and thinking through existing theories about these practices via the K-pop context. As these theories are drawn from English-language fandom scholarship, I focus on the Anglophone subset of K-pop fanfiction writers. As such, Korean names are romanized according to their most common spellings on English-language K-pop websites, such as *Seoulbeats*, *Allkpop,* and *Soompi,* rather than the McCune-Reischauer or Revised Romanization systems. In the article "Domestic Hallyu," Michelle Cho reasons that this informal romanization "preserves the system of reference produced by *hallyu*'s transnational and transmedia exchange" (2316).

While the mandate of fan studies can and does subsume both fictional and non-fictional media fandoms, fan practices such as writing and reading fanfiction are still largely considered the domain of fictional media fandoms (e.g. TV, film, books). My thesis addresses the intersection between fan studies, which investigates how fans interact with fictional media works, and celebrity studies, which investigates how fans interact with non-fictional celebrities. To understand the questions that I have posed above – what does RPF reveal about the nature of fandom? celebrity culture? K-pop? – it is important to grasp the lineage of fanfiction studies within which I am working, as well as the historical background of the phenomenon known around the world today as "K-pop."

To begin, although Henry Jenkins does not discuss real person fiction in *Textual Poachers*, the book remains a key reference for those who study transformative fan work. *Textual Poachers* examines the various practices of a group of fans that Jenkins collectively dubs "media fandom" (1) and presents an alternative narrative to the stereotypes of "fandom" that were prevalent at the time (11). Jenkins points out that organized media fandom has an entirely different and often countercultural mode of reception to the text (e.g. a TV show, a film, etc.), "expand[ing] the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption" and producing meanings that are "more fully integrated into the readers' lives" (45). Jenkins calls these "'poached' meanings." Jenkins argues that these meanings "form the basis for the construction and maintenance of [the] fan community," while "the expectations and the conventions of the fan community also shape the meanings derived from the series and the forms taken by the fans' own artistic creations" (88). Fanfiction, or "fan writing," "builds upon the interpretive practices of the fan community, taking the collective meta-text as the base from which to generate a wider range of media-related stories" (156).

In "How to Watch *Star Trek*," Cassandra Amesley posits another aspect of the fannish mode of reception that she calls "double viewing" (332). Amesley suggests that for fans to "intervene in the construction" (that is, to write fanfiction and produce other transformative fanworks), they must recognize the text as simultaneously "real" and "constructed" (333). Like Jenkins, Amesley is discussing FPF (fictional person fiction), but these early approaches to fan modes of reception are key to my argument that contemporary celebrity culture is filtered through the lens of media fandom practices. Jenkins and Amesley belong to what Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington have defined as the "first wave" of fan studies (2). According to Gray et al., the first wave was "primarily concerned with questions of power and representation. To scholars of early fan studies, the consumption of popular mass media was a site of power struggles. Fandom in such work was portrayed as the tactic of the disempowered, an act of subversion and cultural appropriation against the power of media producers and industries" (2). This first wave was as much a form of activism as academia, attempting to reclaim behaviour "that had been coded as pathological by critics" and "redeem them as creative, thoughtful, and productive" (3).

Gray et al. go on to identify a second and third wave in fan studies. The second wave was based on the "sociology of consumption by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu" and "highlighted the replication of social and hierarchies within fan cultures and subculture" (5). The second wave scholars remained attentive to "questions of power, inequality, and discrimination, but rather than seeing fandom as an a priori tool of empowerment, they suggested that fans' interpretive communities (as well as individual acts of fan consumption are embedded in existing social and cultural conditions" (5). The third wave of fan studies expanded the field "as being a fan became an ever more common mode of cultural engagement," abandoning the earlier models of "fans as

tightly organized participants in fan cultures and subcultures" and considering how "fandom has emerged as an ever more integral aspect of lifeworlds" (6).

My work is situated within a cross-section of all three "waves"; Gray et al. note that they use the label "waves" rather than "phases" in order to "reflect that [while] different conceptual and methodological approaches reached their high watermarks at different points in the development of the field, [the] concerns and approaches of earlier waves have become far from irrelevant" (8). In beginning with the question "Is RPF transgressive?", I seek to recode a fan practice that even other fans consider "pathological." However, in considering fan practices alongside industry practices, I do not read RPF as a simple "a priori tool of empowerment" but rather a phenomenon that is embedded within existing networks of desire. In taking a novel subject like K-pop RPF as the object of analysis and reading it within the theoretical framework of first and second wave fan scholarship, this work is perhaps most firmly entrenched in the domain of third-wave fan studies, which "help us understand and meet challenges beyond the realm of popular culture because they tell us something about how we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to how we read the mediated texts around us" (7).

In *Framing Fan Fiction*, Kristina Busse characterizes fan studies along similar lines, but takes care to quote from Schimmel, Harrington, and Bielby in noting that "fan studies proper mostly divides along two lines: social sciences and media studies" (5). The history of fan studies that Gray et al. provide focuses on the media studies aspect of fan studies, which studies "the relation between media texts and their audiences" (5). This is the approach I take in my thesis. Busse also notes that fan studies, even limited to media fan studies, has a broad remit:

> Fan studies uses approaches as diverse as the study of paratexts… the
>
> interaction of fandom and media industries… the role of affect… literary

contexts… performativity… and archives… Recent work ranges from broad

and inclusive overviews… to highly focused and in-depth readings, such as

Louisa Ellen Stein's study of millennial fan cultures… Rebecca Williams'

postobject fandoms… and Cynthia Walker's look at all aspects of the fifty

years of *Man from U.N.C.L.E*…. fandom. (9-10)

As a result, the remainder of the fan studies portion of this literature review will focus on works

written specifically about RPF.

In the essay "'I'm Jealous of the Fake Me': Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity

Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction," Kristina Busse takes online fanfiction about the "male

vocal group *NSYNC" as her object of study (*Framing Fan Fiction* 41). She defines this genre

of fanfiction, easily recognizable as RPF, as "popslash," which "uses pop stars as their

protagonists as they construct fictional slash [male/male relationships] narratives that supplement

and enhance the ones disseminated by the media" (42). Busse argues that "popslashers exemplify

an aspect of fannish celebrity engagement that simply may be less openly displayed in other

fannish testimonies…. Popslash fans' fictional engagement with the celebrity images suggests a

clear, if not overtly expressed, engagement with the ways stars function for all fans as nodes of

signification, desire, and identification" (42). While the structure of Busse's argument resembles

my own – I also argue that RPF is an extension of "fannish celebrity engagement" that is present

in other, non-RPF areas of fandom – her essay is predicated on the question of identification,

suggesting that "popslash stories imagine the split between the real and the public self, they both

address and thematize the difficulty of performing the postmodern self" (42).

In contrast, I suggest that a critical examination of RPF reveals how fans construct and

perceive the celebrity text, particularly in the K-pop context. Although I agree with Busse that

"fans can concurrently engage in fandom while critically analyzing it," I dispute the idea that "the willful creative (re)writings of media representations and these performative, localized acts of agency that characterize popslash still remain dependent on and thus contained by an entertainment industry that generates initial interest in these celebrities and controls the information that fans rely on (55). The K-pop model of celebrity that I suggest is closer to a circular model, in which fan and industry practices are not linked through processes of causation so much as correlation and amplification.

Melanie Piper's article "Real Body, Fake Person: Recontextualizing Celebrity Bodies in Fandom and Film" takes a different critical approach to RPF, bypassing the ethical question in favour of "examining the similarities between the textual process of adapting real people to fictional characters on both the cinema screen and the computer screen" (0.1). Piper states herself that she is making an effort to "direct the scholarly focus on RPF from these ethical issues to the texts themselves," but as mainstream media adaptations of historical events and people function as key arguments in much of RPF writers' self-defence of their practice, it is impossible to say that the article completely dissociates from the ethical question. Piper takes the 2010 film *The Social Network* as a case study in how "the adaptations of textual bodies are at work in fictionalized fan writing about real actors performing in the Hollywood fictionalized film" (0.1). Like Piper, I seek to shed some light "on how public figures are textualized, adapted, and remediated as transformative works in both fannish and mainstream contexts" and identify the "liminal spaces between fact and fiction that audiences can occupy as both fan fiction writers and readers and as consumers of mainstream dramatizations of real public figures" (8.2). Unlike Piper, who focuses on the complex interaction between the fictionalized version of a historical figure, the real actor playing that figure, and the fanfictionalized version of the fictionalized

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character, I am interested in K-pop RPF because of its compression of these three elements into a single body (the body of the K-pop idol).

Milena Popova's article "'When the RP Gets in the Way of the F': Star Image and Intertextuality in Real Person(a) Fiction" also takes a textual analysis approach to RPF. Popova argues that there is a "dense web of intertextuality between the celebrity's public and official private personas, the imagined real person behind them, and the RPF character" (0.1). Specifically, Popova is interested in how "real" scandals concerning a hockey player affected depictions of that player in RPF. She argues that such crises prove that, whatever the claims of RPF writers, the "real person" continues to play a major role in the fan community's meaning-making process (7.1). Popova observes that "the period of the rape allegations and investigation became an unfillable gap in the RPF canon" and argues that this "indicates that while RPF may 'shape and alter the star'… there are limits to such shaping and altering" (7.1). Popova's article represents a rarely studied aspect of RPF; although it lies beyond the scope of my own research, a potential future direction might be to consider how the "K-pop scandal" affects the model of K-pop celebrity that I propose.

I approach RPF, which represents a small subset of the field of Anglophone fanfiction research, from the perspective of a Korean studies scholar. As such, it is necessary to understand not only the phenomenon known as "K-pop" but also the basic theoretical foundations by which the phenomenon has been understood by English-language scholars working in the field of Korean studies. What is "K-pop"? In the following passage, Suk-Young Kim explains the rise of the term to denote a musical genre at the turn of the millennium:

> In the broadest sense of the word, K-pop, as an abbreviation for Korean
>
> popular music, includes all genres of popular that emerge out of South Korea.

The word was first used in 1995 by the Hong Kong media network Channel V

to label the Korean music videos that they featured. Obviously, the term was

fashioned after J-pop, already in wide circulation to designate Japanese pop

music that was enjoying its heyday. The V Channel used the term K-pop to

reference Korean music that was generally popular in Korea rather than idol

music, which was then in a nascent state. But in the late 2000s, when the term

entered a wide circulation, it came to designate a much smaller fraction of

South Korean music. (8)

At the same time, K-pop is much more than a musical genre. "K-pop" as a term came to

represent not just the music that idols produce but everything that idols are: the intense training

system in which they "willingly forfeit personal freedom to focus single-mindedly on vocal and

dance lessons, learn foreign languages and impeccable stage manners, and prepare themselves

for a successful debut," the intense fanbases that are known "for their deep involvement in

making and breaking K-pop stars' careers," and the intense competition that renders "K-pop [as]

a fast-evolving machine, producing products that, like Kleenex, are used once and thrown away"

(7). Everything about K-pop is intense: Kim goes so far as to describe K-pop as "an animal that

thrives on excess" (6). This can make it a difficult subject to approach from an academic

perspective. Is K-pop an economic phenomenon or a sociological one? Can we study it from the

perspective of musicology or media studies, given its hybridized, transnational, transmedia

nature?

The field of K-pop studies is sometimes known as Hallyu scholarship, a term that

encompasses a much broader range of subjects (not just music, but also TV dramas, films, and

other popular cultural products). Hallyu scholarship is perhaps the most apt term for English-

speaking Korean studies scholars to adopt, as the word "*hallyu*," usually translated as "Korean wave," carries with it the implication of spread; the term functions as a tacit acknowledgement that it is the power of transmission (e.g. transnationalism, transmedia) that brings a localized cultural phenomenon to wider (English-language) academic attention. In the book *Hallyu 2.0*, Sangjoon Lee observes that "academic research and writing about Hallyu has also been flourishing since the early 2000s, in response to the stunning receptions of Korean TV dramas, films, and K-pop in Asia, Europe, and North America. Those who first noticed Hallyu as an academic subject were scholars working primarily in Asia…" (4). The field, as well as Hallyu itself, received a jolt in 2012 with the worldwide viral hit of Psy's "Gangnam Style" (1).

However, the K-pop industry had been seeking new markets in Europe and North America since 2008 (2). SM Entertainment artist BoA, a popular singer in South Korea and Japan, entered the U.S. market in 2008 with the song "Eat You Up"; a year later, Se7en, another popular South Korean artist, released the English-language song "Girls" featuring Lil' Kim (2). Neither song performed well in terms of sales. The tide began to turn post-2010, with Sangjoon Lee attributing the turning point to SM Entertainment's 2011 concert at Le Zénith de Paris, featuring idol groups like TVXQ, Girls' Generation, Super Junior, f(x), and SHINee (2). In 2012, SM Entertainment girl group Girls' Generation made their U.S. TV debut on CBS's *The Late Show with David Letterman*, releasing the single "The Boys" on the same day (3). In 2015, BIGBANG's "Made" tour ranked as one of the top ten highest-grossing tours in the United States (Suk-Young Kim 2). In 2017, BTS became the first Korean act to win Top Social Artist at the Billboard Music Awards (J.K, "BTS Becomes…"); since then, the group has appeared on major U.S. TV network talk shows and performed at the American Music Awards (J.K, "BTS To Perform…") and the Grammy Awards (Bruner). Of equal importance is BTS' sales record: their

albums have seen a steady rise on the Billboard 200 after their EP *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: Part 1* first broke into the chart in 2015 (Dorof), with their latest album, *Map of the Soul: 7,* becoming their fourth album to chart at No. 1 (McIntyre).

The heightened focus on "K-pop" in recent years tends to obscure Hallyu scholarship's beginnings in TV dramas. Sangjoon Lee writes that "the term Hallyu was first coined by Chinese media in 1998 to describe Chinese youths' sudden craze for Korean popular-culture products," eventually making its way to Japan with the 2003 broadcast of the soap opera *Winter Sonata* (6). According to Lee, this cultural shift occurred "at the same time that the Asian market emerged as the nation's new engine of sustainable growth… Korea turned its attention to the Asian marketplace during the late 1990s… It was at this moment that the government embraced the 'Globalization' slogan as a reaction to the economic globalization process…" (8). Much of Hallyu scholarship has focused on this entanglement between the South Korean culture and entertainment industries and the South Korean state. Lee writes, "Recent discourse on the Asian cultural market, on that account, suggests that Hallyu should cooperate with Korea's global corporations, IT businesses, and the government's foreign policies to penetrate Asian markets and exploit maximum profits to build a 'Global Korea'" (8). Youna Kim writes, "The success of Korean popular culture overseas is drawing an unfamiliar spotlight on a culture once colonized or overshadows for centuries by powerful countries… The Korean government sees this phenomenon as a way to sell a dynamic image of the nation through soft power, the ability to entice and attract" (3).

Youna Kim argues that this state-industry relationship was born in the context of South Korea's compressed modernity in the late 1990s (3). She writes:

Since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the Korean government has thoroughly

re-examined the process of modernization and targeted the export of popular

media culture as a new economic initiative, one of the major sources of foreign

revenue vital for the country's economic survival and advancement. Korea,

with limited natural resources, sought to reduce its dependence on a

manufacturing base under competitive threat from China… The Korean Wave

started from the efforts of private sectors, but the government has played a key

role in the speed of growth. A systematic political infrastructure set by the

government and institutional strategies developed by the industry have

combined to produce the pretext to the rise of the Korean wave. The Korean

cultural industry has been developed as a national project competing within

globalization, not against it. (3-4)

Academia has also played a role in this state-industry relationship. With the

establishment of the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE), the

Korean government has cultivated a relationship with academia that involves investing "an

enormous number of research grants, fellowships, and financial supports and incentives into

research institutes and universities" and launching new academic departments in the fields of

cultural studies and digital media studies (Sangjoon Lee 9). Although such investments can

produce an academic discourse that confines itself to "explor[ing] the possible contributions

Hallyu can make to boost the nation's economy," some academics have responded critically to

this kind of government intervention (10). Gooyong Kim examines South Korea's "neoliberal

social industrial reconfigurations since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis" through the perspective

of K-pop girl groups (xvi); Suk-Young Kim suggests a neoliberal explanation for why the South

Korean government might host "a booth at a pop culture convention like KCON," arguing that "KCON presents an example of such neoliberal dependency between the market and the nation, which takes the form of branding the nation and nationalizing the brand" (194). In taking English-speaking fandom as my object of study, my thesis shifts away from this focus on state power, although my ANT conception of the K-pop industry necessarily includes the state as a major node in the network.

According to Lee, the history of Hallyu scholarship has shifted around critical responses to the word "globalization." Hallyu scholars have moved from "embrac[ing] the notions of globalization, hybridity, and regional/transnational/transcultural media flows of Korean cultural products, notably film, television drama, and popular music, in and beyond Asia" (10) to perceiving globalization "as another name for American cultural imperialism" (11) to celebrating globalization as "benefit[ing] Korean media… celebrating its global recognition and enjoying multiple penetrations in adjacent markets and beyond" (12). Lee's own book posits that the rise of K-pop idol bands post-2010 characterizes a new trend in Hallyu scholarship, viewing Hallyu as less of a transnational phenomenon and more of a transmedia phenomenon. Dal-Yong Jin uses the term "Hallyu 2.0" to describe how "Hallyu has experienced a significant transformation with the growth of digital technologies, in particular, social media, such as YouTube, social network sites (SNSs), and smartphones… Unlike Hallyu 1.0, which emphasized the export of local cultural goods to East Asia, the growth of digital/social media in Hallyu 2.0 has uniquely influenced the Korean creative industries" (53).

This has led to the concurrent rise of fandom studies within Hallyu scholarship, as "fans all around [the] world also participate in fandom activities through social media" (Sangjoon Lee 15). In "Hallyu versus Hallyu-hwa," JungBong Choi argues:

The life of Hallyu as a cultural process/phenomenon does not begin or end

with the supply of content as such. Instead, it is animated by affective and

communicative actions taken by overseas fans who are also in close contact

with domestic fans through various channels. Therefore, the fan is a vital force

interior to the workings of Hallyu as a cultural process, though exterior to the

productive site of Hallyu content. (42)

Choi goes on to write:

… the Hallyu culture has been shaped and altered by fans themselves, who

shoulder the role not just of information provider/mediator/distributor but also

of cultural designer/administrator… Online fan clubs are arguably by far the

most powerful pacesetters of Hallyu and K-pop fandoms. The ones that stand

head and shoulders above the rest are Soompi and allkpop, multimedia online

fansites, into which a nonstop flurry of information, gossips, reviews, rumors,

comments, and video are streamed. (43)[1]

Like Choi, I consider K-pop fans, both "domestic" and "international," to be major

players in the dissemination and interpretation of the K-pop phenomenon. As such, the K-pop

fan in the collective also holds a key role in the ANT conception of the "K-pop industry" I have

outlined above, making the division between "industry" practices and "fan" practices somewhat

artificial. As I intend to prove that these practices are one and the same, however, this distinction

is preserved for the sake of comparison.

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[1] Note: I have worked at *Soompi* as a writer and assistant editor since 2015.

In combining fan studies and celebrity studies in this manner, I seek to prove that it is not just mainstream media forms – TV shows, films, tabloid magazines – that shape the way that fans perceive famous people. Fan practices such as fanfiction and fan discourse are crucial in the perception and the construction of public personas. K-pop is an ideal medium for studying the collision between "celebrity fan practices" and "media fan practices," as K-pop artists function as "all-around entertainers whose primary career goal [is] to gain popularity by excelling in all aspects of media performance, such as singing, dancing, being a charming guest on variety shows, and always presenting an attractive public persona, all under the constant scrutiny of the mediatized world" (Suk-Young Kim 3). The perception of K-pop as a "multimedia performance" (5) blurs the line between fictional and nonfictional media worlds, thereby drawing attention to the similarities between fan and industry practices in both worlds.

To address these issues, I split my argument into three chapters. In the first chapter, titled "What's in a (Stage) Name? Public Personas, Private Selves, and the Transgression of Authenticity," I investigate how stage names and real names are used in the K-pop industry and in K-pop fanfiction. Although many K-pop idols use stage names—of the nine current members of EXO, six use stage names when promoting as part of the band—K-pop fanfiction writers tend to use the idols' real names in their works. In this chapter, I argue that the stage name/real name dialectic represents the perceived dichotomy between the public persona and the private self. Although both the K-pop industry and K-pop RPF refer back to this dichotomy to justify certain practices, both also performatively transgress it in order to generate an affect that cannot be evoked by the public or the private alone. Fanfiction writers like grisclair defend the practice of writing K-pop RPF by arguing that they do not trespass on the "real selves" of K-pop idols, a claim that is belied by the general use of "real names" in fanfiction works.

In this chapter, I consider the stage name in three different fields in celebrity studies—film stars, TV stars, and music stars—in order to build a theoretical basis for investigating stage names in K-pop, which Suk-Young Kim has defined as a "multimedia performance" that combines "acting, singing, dancing, and talk shows" (9). With this theoretical background in mind, I look at how EXO uses the stage name/real name dialectic in their reality TV shows, *EXO's Showtime* and *Travel the World on EXO's Ladder.* I argue that the deployment of the real name in mediated situations creates the effect of intimacy, which I define as an affect generated through the performative gesture toward interiority—the perception that there is something deeper that lies beneath the public persona. To return to fanfiction, I argue that K-pop RPF writers are aware of this divide and take advantage of it for their own practice. For this section, I draw from online "meta"—fan-driven discussion about fandom and fan work— that has been written about RPF ("Meta"). I suggest that RPF writers also use "real" details, such as real names, as performative gestures toward interiority—albeit an interiority that they see as theirs to invent.

This chapter concludes with the suggestion that the similar practices regarding the stage name/real name dialectic in the K-pop industry and in K-pop fanfiction espouses a surface-level commitment to a "static" model of celebrity that splits the self into a "public persona" and a "private self." In reality, these practices point toward the K-pop idol embodying a dynamic model of celebrity in which affective value is generated through a negotiation between what appears to be public and what appears to be private.

In the second chapter, titled "Characterizing" K-Pop Idols: Alternate Universes and the K-Pop Concept," I investigate the fanfiction practice known as "alternate universe" and the industry practice known as "concepts." In fanfiction, "alternate universe" refers to fanworks that

"change one or more elements of the source works' canon," usually by transplanting the source

work's characters to a different setting, changing the genre of the story, or changing the

characters' backstories ("Alternate Universe"). In K-pop, the "concept" sets the entire

framework for an idol group's musical release: the music, the choreography, the costumes, the

lyrics, the music video, the album jacket photos, and the bodies of the idols themselves (Mimyo

12-13). In this chapter, I argue not only that these are equivalent practices but also that they both

function as an embodiment of the dynamic model of celebrity that I proposed in the first chapter.

I posit that the K-pop idol is constructed as a "character," in which the negotiation between the

public and the private is grounded in the matrix of the idol's "character-image."

This chapter draws heavily from Marc Steinberg's research into the anime media mix, as

well as Hiroki Azuma's "database model" in contemporary *otaku* culture. The narrative concept

is an example of what Henry Jenkins calls "transmedia storytelling" (*Convergence Culture* 95), a

proliferation across multiple media performances and multiple media platforms that is made

possible by the properties of K-pop idols' bodies. Suk-Young Kim writes that K-pop idols'

physical bodies "are heavily altered to emulate the ideals of body types that frequent graphic

novels and animations" in order to "maximize the profitability of their performance across

media" (156). Steinberg argues that the anime character has two key traits: mobility, a

"combination of name and visual design" that sets it apart from its medium, and communication,

which allows it to move between mediums (84). Rather than RPF writers "turning" K-pop idols

into characters, I argue that the K-pop industry already considers K-pop idols as characters in

this sense: a "character-image" that moves across mediums but is anchored by a "combination of

name and visual design." I posit that the "character-image" is constructed through a combination

of the idol's body (and images of that body), the idol's name (both stage name and real name), and a few core character traits.

This piecemeal construction of the idol "character-image" has its basis in Hiroki Azuma's "database model," in which fans are drawn toward characters and characteristics rather than overarching narratives, which has the consequence of rendering characters more powerful than "the authorship of the original creator" (47-48). Azuma goes on to argue that a database model produces a dissociative subjectivity, in which fans willingly consume small, unconnected narratives without expressing the desire for a grand narrative (75). I argue that this is what is happening in alternate universe fanfiction, which establishes characters as the "common ground" for a fanfiction community whose practices range from fantasy and science fiction to pure erotica. As the same thing happens in the K-pop context, with idols' character-images remaining intact through changes in concepts, I argue that character-images function as vessels that move fan desire from one narrative world to another.

This chapter concludes with a closer look at one of EXO's narrative concepts, the "EXO Planet" concept," which conceives of the EXO members as superpowered aliens. I argue that this concept, which assigns each EXO member an easily recognizable superpower, is a highly visible example of the general process by which K-pop idols undergo characterization. This type of characterization has become increasingly important as the K-pop industry (SM Entertainment in particular) shifts toward producing groups with rotating lineups. The character holds together in tension the fannish desire for novelty and the fannish desire for stability: fans are not indiscriminate remixers, incapable of recognizing the boundary between "real" and "fictional," but in fact constantly aware of fanwork's status as derivative.

In the third chapter, titled "Believing in the Unusual: Slash Fanfiction and Homoerotic Fan Service," I offer an argument for why the industry's shift toward groups with rotating lineups is ultimately unsustainable. I posit that the "character-image" that grounds the public/private negotiation exists not in a vacuum but within a network of interpersonal relationships that give the image meaning. In support of this argument, I compare the fan practice of "slash" shipping to the industry practice of homoerotic fan service. The former refers to a genre of fanfiction that posits male/male relationships between source work characters or real-life celebrities (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 186; V. Arrow 323), while the latter refers to practices such as male idols cross-dressing for the benefit of a female audience (Oh and Oh 24). On the fanfiction side, I look at examples of slash fanfiction in the EXO fandom, with particular emphasis on how certain sub-genres (e.g. polyamory) reflect broader industry trends. On the fan service side, I draw on a range of theoretical work that discusses gendered constructions in the K-pop context. David Oh describes the homosocial male space of a South Korean TV program, in which casual acts of homosociality are balanced by performative acts of heterosexuality (261). I argue that a similar process occurs in the "homosocial male space" of a K-pop boy band. Timothy Laurie notes that the lack of mixed-gender groups in K-pop renders the K-pop group dynamic as a "fundamentally homosocial" space (219). This space is liminal and ambiguous, a suspended position in which acts like cross-dressing and skinship are "considered neither an absence of masculinity nor homosexuality" (Oh and Oh 9).

The title of the chapter comes from Ling Yang and Hongwei Bao's article on the *Super Girl* RPF fandom, which quotes an RPF writer in saying, "The so-called pairing does not mean that something has actually happened between the two characters. It only suggests that you are willing to believe that there is something unusual between them" (850). I argue that this belief in

something "unusual" goes beyond establishing a common ground for the practices of slash fanfiction and homoerotic fan service—rather, it strikes at the heart of fannish existence. Drawing on meta posts that express anxiety about the "true" nature of the EXO members' interpersonal relationships with each other, I posit that it is the belief in a deeply intimate intragroup dynamic (regardless of whether this is meant in a sexual, romantic, platonic, or familial sense) that drives fan desire for the group. A group with a rotating lineup either fails to establish this intragroup dynamic and therefore fails to capture fans' attention, or establishes a certain configuration to which fans grow attached and resist attempts by the industry to change it thereafter.

Finally, I conclude this work by retracing the principal moves I have made thus far in comparing fanfiction practices like the use of real names, the construction of alternate universes, and "slash" shipping to industry practices like the use of stage names, the deployment of "concepts," and homoerotic fan service. In highlighting the similarities between fan and industry practices, I argue that K-pop RPF should not be seen as a transgression but rather as an extension of general fannish behaviour that is encouraged and exploited by the K-pop industry. RPF writers are highly cognizant of the model of celebrity that the K-pop industry espouses, one in which intimate celebrity is generated through the performative transgression of what appears to be public and what appears to be private. This transgression is a constant negotiation that must take place as long as the celebrity wishes to generate affective value. As such, this back-and-forth is grounded in the "character-image," an embodiment of this negotiation that can then proliferate across other mediums. However, this character-image depends on a network of interpersonal relationships in order to generate meaning and "enmesh" fan desire. The conclusion also offers a space to discuss why, despite the entanglement of fan and industry

practices, RPF remains a controversial phenomenon. I suggest that a direction for future research might be in how the introduction of violent or sexual content changes the process by which fans "characterize" the K-pop idol. In highlighting the similarities between fan practices and practices performed or encouraged by the K-pop industry, I hope to make clear that RPF fanfiction is a controversy of degree and not of kind, and that to debate the ethics of real-person fiction is to debate the essence of fandom itself.

Chapter 1

What's in a (Stage) Name? Public Personas, Private Selves, and the Transgression of Authenticity

The fanfiction work "In the Territory of the Dragon King," by AO3 user curledupkitten (chanyeol), only has one tag: "Byun Baekhyun/Do Kyunsoo [sic] | D.O." (Do Kyunsoo is a misspelling of the name Do Kyungsoo, which the AO3 search engine corrects for.) The "tag" is a function of the Archive of Our Own (AO3) that allows creators to optimize their work for the archive's search engine by appending character names, common tropes, or content warnings ("Archive FAQ"). The sole tag for "In the Territory of the Dragon King" is a relationship tag, which means that anyone looking for fanfiction works about the relationship between EXO members Baekhyun and D.O. would use this tag to facilitate their search. The relationship tag's design as a "slash" between two character names has deep roots in the history of fan culture; in *Textual Poachers,* Henry Jenkins cites this fan practice of "slashing" as the etymological root of the fanfiction genre known as "slash" (186). The tag "Byun Baekhyun/Do Kyungsoo | D.O" has another notable punctuative characteristic, however: the second name, Do Kyungsoo, is connected via a vertical bar to the name D.O. This refers to the fact that the EXO member known as D.O has two names: D.O, a stage name based on his surname of Do, and Do Kyungsoo. What should we call this second name? His given name? His legal name? His real name? If we call it a "real" name, does this mean that the stage name – and by extension, the stage persona – is not real? What does that signify for "real person fiction"?

"In the Territory of the Dragon King" is an RPF (real person fiction) fanfiction work that centres on the relationship between these two members of EXO. Although not tagged as such, "In the Territory of the Dragon King" is an "alternate universe" work that reimagines the EXO

members as characters in a world where EXO as a massively popular K-pop boy band does not exist. Instead, the EXO members are given new backstories: Baekhyun runs a small inn on Jeju Island, inherited from his grandmother, and Kyungsoo (as he is referred to in the story) is a businessman from Seoul who comes to stay. The cast of characters, which includes not only EXO members but also several idols from other groups, share one characteristic: they are all referred to by their "real" names. This is such a common practice in writing RPF fanfiction (particularly in K-pop, where many idols use stage names) that the AO3 tags have been designed to facilitate searches for both the "stage name" and the "real name" – hence, the vertical bar in "Do Kyungsoo | D.O." Since "In the Territory of the Dragon King" takes place in an alternate universe in which EXO does not exist as such, it makes sense not to use stage names, which are meaningless outside of the EXO-as-boy-band framework. Nonetheless, the decision to use "real names" belies RPF writers' claim that they do not transgress upon celebrities' "real selves" (grisclair).

In this chapter, I argue that while both the K-pop industry and K-pop RPF are premised upon the dichotomy between the public persona and the private self, both also performatively transgress that dichotomy to generate an affect that cannot be evoked by either the public or the private alone. On one hand, K-pop RPF relies on the theoretical divide between the public persona and the private self in order to justify its own existence even as its practices threaten any such clear-cut divide. On the other hand, the K-pop industry constructs this public/private dichotomy in order to transgress it in the pursuit of authenticity, and it is this authenticity that fans are seeking when they speak of the "real" (in real names, in real person fiction, etc.). I conclude by suggesting that these transgressions point toward a new model of celebrity as

embodied by the K-pop idol: not a persona, a mask or stage name to be removed at will, but a constant negotiation between the very-much-public and the not-so-public.

In a listicle published on the English-language Korean entertainment news website *Soompi*, Azra_A describes stage names as "a fun K-pop tradition where performers go by an alias that adds an extra dimension to how we see them." For example, in EXO, Suho is a stage name that refers to the idol's position as leader of the group, as the word "*suho* (수호)" in Korean also means "to protect." New idols are often asked to explain their stage names, either by reporters or by fans, and their answers come to circulate in the collective pool of knowledge held by the idol group's fans (BTS-Trans). Idols have also been known to change their stage names midway through their careers: in 2016, GOT7 member Junior changed his stage name to Jinyoung (J.K, "GOT7's Junior Announces…"), and in 2017, BTS member Rap Monster announced that he was changing his stage name to "RM" (J.K, "BTS's RM Officially Announces…").

However, the initial stage name can prove to be surprisingly stubborn. Several months after the initial announcement, another BTS member accidentally referred to RM as "RapMon" (a clipped version of Rap Monster) during a live broadcast (BTS). Kris Wu, a former member of EXO who now promotes in China under the name Wu Yifan, is still credited as "Kris" in the movie *XxX: Return of Xander Cage* ("XxX: Return of Xander Cage"). This film was released in 2017, three years after Kris terminated his relationship with SM Entertainment, the agency who bears at least partial responsibility for the initial stage name (I and Seo). In fact, all the EXO members still go by their original stage names, even if the reasoning behind those names no longer persists. For example, in 2019, EXO's Chen released two solo albums under the name "Chen" despite the fact that it has been many years since he promoted explicitly as part of the

subunit EXO-M (Gim). EXO-M was a subunit of EXO, based in China and singing in Mandarin, and Chen's stage name was deliberately designed to reflect his membership in that group despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that he neither identifies as Chinese nor speaks Mandarin natively (marggee).

Situating the K-pop idol within the broader context of celebrity studies necessitates looking at three different bodies of research: film stars, TV celebrities, and music celebrities. This is primarily due to the multimodal nature of K-pop. Although K-pop is broadly understood "as an abbreviation for Korean popular music," Suk-Young Kim points out that "K-pop is a music scene whose Korean origin and global destination constantly vie to define its identity" (8). Kim embraces the "generative" potential of this identity crisis by suggesting other possible meanings for the "K" in K-pop, such as "kaleidoscopic," "keyboard/keypad," "Kleenex," and "korporate." It is the "kaleidoscopic" term that I seize upon here to describe K-pop's place at the confluence of film and music: Kim writes that "kaleidoscopic pop leads to the crucial concept of multimedia… first as multiple forms of performance, combining acting, singing, dancing, and talk shows to create a complex array of multimedia performances rather than just a music genre" (9). The K-pop star must be understood not only as a music celebrity but also as someone who embodies what Kim calls "spectacular visuality, which includes good looks, a unique fashion statement, and dance moves" (15). P. David Marshall also points out the element of visuality present among music celebrities outside of the K-pop context: "the presentation of the star, his or her music roots, style of dress, manner of speech, and public display of sexuality are all significant markers for the structuring and differentiating of youth culture" (161). Given this kaleidoscopic confluence, the following section considers stage names in all three contexts (film, TV, and music) before looking at stage names in K-pop proper.

Stage names are mentioned briefly in Richard Dyer's book *Stars*, a film studies text that looks at the development and significance of stardom in Hollywood. Dyer mentions that John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe used stage names while Jane Fonda and Robert Redford did not; he attributes this difference to the cinema becoming increasingly "character-oriented," a term that he borrows from literary scholars who characterize novelistic literature as moving away from "emblematic" characters to "particularized" characters (97-98). Dyer also notes that "names can be foregrounded in relation to identity… it is very common for people to speak of a character in a film as having the star's name" (109). Here, Dyer is speaking of the conflation of the film star with their onscreen character, which in his view obscures the original "constructed-ness" of the film star:

> Stars are, like characters in stories, representations of people… However,
> unlike characters in stories, stars are also real people… Because stars have an
> existence in the world independent of their screen/"fiction" appearances, it is
> possible to believe… that as people they are more real than characters in
> stories. This means that they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as
> much produced images, constructed personalities as "characters" are. (20)

Note Dyer's turn of phrase here: stars are "*more real* than characters in stories." Their offscreen personalities, as the word *personality* implies, are always in relation – perhaps even in debt – to their onscreen personas. Not only are offscreen personalities just as "constructed" as onscreen characters, as Dyer says, but "realness" (as physical existence) carries an affective value that transcends and partially conceals this process of construction.

On the television side, Su Holmes' essay "It's A Jungle Out There!" looks at this "fiction"/"more real" dialectic through the case of Jordan/Katie, a "26-year-old glamour model

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[who] has found fame in Britain largely due to the size of her surgically-enhanced breasts" (56). Jordan's appearance on a reality TV show generated an "*extraordinarily* self-conscious debate about the relationship between 'Jordan,' the media image, and the person known in reality as 'Katie Price,' who was perceived by the show as being her 'real' self" (56). It is worth noting here that this dual identity was primarily focused through the lens of Jordan/Katie's romantic relationship with another celebrity on the show (57). As I will suggest later, the use of real names in RPF fanfiction cannot be disentangled from the depiction of interpersonal relationships between the "characters" in the story. Moreover, the other participants on the show frequently switched between the names Jordan and Katie, a fact that will be significant when I discuss EXO's own reality TV show later this chapter.

Holmes ends her discussion of this case with the note that Jordan/Katie are not as equal in that binary as the "slash" suggests: the Jordan/Katie persona/personalities are not only inextricably bound up with class and gender, but the reality show itself buys into "the notion that there is a 'core' to be found, even if this is partly 'in process' in the [show]. What is important… is the general suggestion that the public (celebrity) self and the private ('real') self may well be blurred, but they can ultimately be separated" (58). Like in Dyer's account, the "private/real" carries a value that the "public/celebrity" does not. In reality television, it may appear as though the value of the "real" (the "core") is being extracted from the public/celebrity "ore" that surrounds it. In fact, this value is generated through the simultaneous processes of blurring and separation. Separating the "real" from the "less real" identifies a "core" to be extracted, but the "ore" in this extended metaphor (i.e. the "public/celebrity") is not discarded but rather given enhanced value through the process of extraction.

A similar process of value generation occurs in the case of music celebrities. In "The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity," P. David Marshall argues that "the transformations that have taken place in popular music in the twentieth century can be attributed to a number of factors… all of [which] have been modalized around concepts of *authenticity*" (150, italics my own). Marshall takes New Kids on the Block as a case study, which is important because of the influence of that group in particular and 1990s American boy bands in general on the development of Korean idol groups (Park and Kim). Indeed, Marshall uses the term "idol" in his case study, writing:

> If one looks at the history of pop stars who have been marketed and positioned
> in the role of "teen idol," it becomes readily apparent that though all are
> musical performers, music has often been less central to these individuals'
> profitability as celebrities than have other products. Marketing of the teen idol
> generally focuses on the image, which is circulated in a number of formats that
> go beyond the musical product: posters, animated television series, Barbie-
> sized look-alike dolls, comic and photobiographical books, fanzines, clothing,
> and lunch pail designs. (168)

This focus on the image rather than the music, according to Marshall, gives New Kids on the Block "all the qualities of illegitimacy… they didn't write their own songs; they didn't play their own instruments; they were chosen in a talent search and didn't develop independent of the music industry apparatus; they made a great deal of money; they appealed to preteens; and they were managed very carefully" (173). These "qualities of illegitimacy" could be applied to any K-pop group – they are certainly true of EXO. In a *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* review of a concert given at Dickies Arena by "K-pop supergroup SuperM," Stefan Stevenson writes:

From the opening vocal of the first song, "I Can't Stand the Rain," it was clear

most, if not all, of the show would be lip synced. Most of the show was

obviously tracked as the seven members spent their time frantically moving in

sync with each other, which is part of the charm for K-pop fans… No musical

instruments ever made an appearance during the show, which means the most

important performance of the night was by the person running the soundboard

at the back of the floor.[2]

Lip syncing has long been a contentious issue in discussions of musical authenticity. The topic receives extensive treatment in Philip Auslander's *Liveness* as well as Suk-Young Kim's *K-Pop Live.* Kim offers counter-evidence to the idea that the K-pop industry as a whole does not value live performance by quoting a Korean TV producer's comments about the prevalence of lip syncing on music shows and mentioning planned (though ultimately scrapped) methods of dealing with this issue (69-70). Auslander compares the lip syncing scandals of Milli Vanilli and Ashlee Simpson to discuss how fans of pop music, who do not necessarily conform to the same ideologies as fans of rock music, respond differently to questions of authenticity (126). Crucially, Auslander mentions that Simpson rehabilitated her image by appearing on *Saturday Night Live* and publicly acknowledging her mistake, as well as introducing (in live performance) a song she wrote about the scandal (126). Auslander writes that this "positioned Simpson squarely within rock ideology by stressing her authorship of the song and its autobiographical nature." Auslander and Marshall's insights suggest that music celebrities are just like reality TV stars in the sense that authenticity ("realness") is about proving an existence behind the image, which in turn adds value to the image.

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[2] SuperM includes two members of EXO: Baekhyun and Kai (Herman, "Get to Know…").

I refer to this as *intimacy*: the acknowledgement of and performative gesture toward interiority—the perception of "something else" that lies beneath the public persona (the idea of *depth* is crucial here), partially concealed but always informing the persona above. The creative act of writing a song about one's personal experience connects the "interior" with the "public." The public scandal is given new depth and weight: the audience, who has previously known only the "public," feels like they have gotten a privileged glimpse into the "private." In similar terms, Marshall writes that the love songs performed by teen idols serve as a conduit between the audience (the fan) and the "personal and private realm of the singer" and more generally that "popular music works… [to break] down the distance between the pop star and the individual audience member at the very least in the level of fantasy for the audience member" (177). The idol's relationship to celebrity is characterized as a "play between accessibility to the group members' intimate world and the impossibility of fully entering that world" (179). In his paper about the K-pop star Rain, Hyunjoon Shin suggests that the English stage name "Rain" (a literal translation of the Korean stage name "Bi") served to position the star within a global market (514-515). This does not explain the Korean stage name Bi, however, and I suggest that the stage name is less about marketing and more about characterizing the "play" between accessibility and impossibility.

In 2013, EXO starred in their own reality TV series called *EXO's Showtime. Showtime* purports to depict the "off-stage" life of the EXO members but actually shows the members participating in highly staged events such as throwing birthday parties (Episode 3), exchanging Secret Santa gifts (Episode 4), and engaging in musical or physical games with each other (Episode 9). In her essay on (English-language) celebrity reality TV, Su Holmes notes that "reality TV's claim to present the real, to strip away the celebrity persona, comes into conflict

with its status as an openly performative space which is deeply self-conscious about its mediated status" (52). The footage in *Showtime*, as in most Korean "reality" shows, does not attempt to pass itself off as raw or unedited; on the contrary, the show features vivid subtitles and visual effects to accentuate the viewing experience. *Showtime*'s claim to authenticity therefore lies not in how it is presented (i.e. its format) but in how the people onscreen comport themselves: the members are shown wearing casual clothing, cracking inside jokes, and perhaps most crucially, referring to each other by their real names.

The show does not begin with such casual transgressions of authenticity. In the first episode, each member is introduced with a subtitle that gives his stage name. When the members are asked to pick the person whom they think is most handsome, they are careful to use each other's stage names as well as their own (Kris names himself as "Kris" in this segment). In another segment, other idols at SM Entertainment are asked whether they can identify the EXO members by name. During this segment, TVXQ member Changmin proudly proclaims that he not only knows Xiumin's stage name, but also his real name of Kim Minseok. This display of knowledge is meant to signify that he is close enough to Xiumin, or at least interested enough in him, to know both his names. A few seconds later, both members of TVXQ are unable to identify Lay's stage name, although they both know that his real name is Yixing. Yunho pretends to leave the room (i.e. escapes the camera frame) in embarrassment at not knowing the answer, but Changmin soon reveals that (at least on his part) this was a charade: he does know Lay's stage name.

This interaction is a particularly complicated interplay between stage name and real name: depending on the context, knowing the stage name *or* knowing the real name can be a sign of intimacy (i.e. senior-junior intimacy within a company). Not knowing either or both can be a

sign of shame, of a breakdown in relations between neighbours (the interaction takes place backstage during an intra-agency concert called "SM Town"). But more generally, this interaction exposes the conflict that Holmes points to in reality TV, between its claim to "strip away the celebrity persona" and its "status as an openly performative space which is deeply self-conscious about its mediated status" (52). Changmin pretending not to know Lay's stage name is a staged joke, partially if not completely for the benefit of the camera, yet it paradoxically signifies authenticity and intimacy by bridging the (perceived, if not actually real) gap between TVXQ, a veteran idol group that has promoted for more than ten years at the time of broadcast, and EXO, a relatively new idol group that have been together less than two years. *Showtime* itself gestures to this conflict in the next minute: when Suho approaches the members of Super Junior to ask them the same question, he finds two of them rehearsing in their dressing room. The subtitles make note of this fact, but add a little addendum: 설정? or 리얼? (*trans.* "set-up? or real?")

By the ninth episode, the show itself has begun to make distinctions between the stage name and the real name, depending on the context. During vocal rehearsals, Luhan reminisces about a song that Suho used to sing during their trainee days. When Suho begins singing the song in the present-day, the subtitles note, "수호가 부르는 연습생 준면이의 애창곡" (*trans.* Suho is singing trainee Junmyeon's favorite song). The way this subtitle is set up, it implies that Suho and Junmyeon (Suho's real name) are different people, separated not only by their name but their idol/trainee statuses. The song connects these dual identities, albeit in a somewhat developmental manner: Luhan notes that Suho used to make mistakes on the pitch on the song as a trainee, and Suho's demonstration of the song now is as much to show that he has improved as a vocalist as to gesture back to his "trainee days." The stage name/real name dichotomy works here to show

that the celebrity has a past, has depth, and more importantly that fans can have access to that depth by knowing more about the past. Similarly, in Episode 4, the members speak about an incident in which they witnessed D.O crying while watching anime, and the subtitles denote this moment as, "애니메이션에 감동 받은 소년 경수" (*trans.* the young boy Kyungsoo was moved by the animation). Although the members do not specify when this incident took place, the use of "young boy" as well as D.O's real name gestures back to a nostalgic past.

Although these incidents give a clue as to how EXO utilizes stage names in pursuit of authenticity, *Showtime* is characterized overall by a careful adherence to stage names. By 2019, however, the members' personal (but still onscreen) interactions have shifted dramatically in favour of the real name. During the show *Travel the World on EXO's Ladder Season 2*, within the first two minutes of the premiere episode, Suho refers to Xiumin as "Minseok." This reference comes into the context of Xiumin answering a private phone call despite the fact that cameras have already begun rolling. Xiumin quickly terminates the call with the excuse that he is filming, but Sehun responds playfully, "There are no cameras," implying that to openly acknowledge that they are filming would be a breach of the "fourth wall" that the camera represents in reality television.

As the opening segment commences, *Travel the World on EXO's Ladder* frequently repeats the refrain that this is EXO's first reality show together in five years, an obvious reference to *Showtime,* which ended in 2014. But as the opening shot makes clear, there are eight members of EXO, as opposed to the twelve that made up the opening shot of *Showtime.* This gap is not once acknowledged in the show, and indeed, it is presumed that fans already know why this is the case. Less obvious is why the stage name/real name boundary has become much more fluid than it was in *Showtime*. For instance, in the same opening segment, D.O is referred to as

both D.O and Kyungsoo. The production staff sometimes "correct" the members' use of

"Kyungsoo" by using "D.O" in the subtitles even when they are directly transcribing what the

members say, but this is not always a consistent practice. I suggest that this has to do with the

intervening five years of EXO's career, as well as the format of *Travel the World on EXO's*

Ladder. By now, fans are assumed to be familiar with both the members' stage names and real

names, just as they are familiar with why the number of EXO members has been reduced. In

addition, *Travel the World on EXO's Ladder,* unlike *Showtime*, is not broadcast on television (it

is available via the streaming platform Oksusu), reducing the likelihood of non-fans coming

across the show.

I am not claiming here that idols are always making calculated decisions about whether to

refer to their fellow members by their stage names or their real names. It is quite likely that, as

members of idol groups usually train together for years before they make their debut and are

assigned stage names, they are simply more accustomed to using the real name. Nonetheless, the

effect is one of intimacy, of a private world that is separate from the world of onstage

performances and televised appearances, at which fans can get a glimpse of through these posts

and broadcasts. That *Showtime* is a televised appearance that nonetheless gives access to this

kind of intimacy supports Dyer's claim that "personality [is] itself a construction known and

expressed only through films, stories, publicity, etc." (20). The real name serves as a kind of

shorthand for this private world, proof of "the basic and essential authenticity that a 'real' person

is housed in the sign construction" (Marshall xlix). In Marshall's words, the real name represents

"accessibility to the group members' intimate world" and the stage name represents "the

impossibility of fully entering that world" (179). Intimacy, as the transgression of distance*,* can

only be created by first creating distance, which the stage name does.[3] (Not every idol uses a stage name, which indicates that the stage name is not the only way of creating this distance.)

While there are many factors behind the use of stage names in the Korean entertainment industry, not least of which is a cultural preoccupation with names as a source of good fortune ("Name Change in Korea"), many Korean celebrities speak of the fact that their real names did not "sound celebrity-like" enough to use (platinum1004). In other words, an important function of the stage name is to create this sense of distance from everyday life, to nominally move the star from the sphere of private ordinariness into the sphere of public extraordinariness. Marshall goes even further and argues that it is this "combination of familiarity and extraordinariness [that] gives the celebrity its ideological power" (86). Bound up in that, of course, is the idea that the ordinary sphere is the "real" and the extraordinary sphere is somehow "false" (Dyer 43), which means that a K-pop star who uses a stage name must periodically gesture back to their real name to prove their realness, to demonstrate their authenticity by performatively transgressing the distance they have created.

An example of this can be seen in a girl group member's appearance on a reality show called *Baek Jong Won's Alley Restaurant* ("Episode 208"). Solar, a member of the girl group MAMAMOO, was brought on the show to sample a dish served by a restaurant on the show. The reason for Solar's appearance, as cited by the show's production staff, was her self-proclaimed love for that specific dish. But her appearance was almost immediately questioned by the show's hosts, who joked that the name "Solar" (a clearly English name) sounded like a person who would enjoy pasta (typically perceived to be a "Western" food) more than the dish that she had

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[3] Marshall uses the term "transgression" in a similar way in "The Cinematic Apparatus," arguing that the "maintenance of celebrity status for the film actor" involves an "intense search for their meaning and coherence beyond the screen into their private lives" (105).

been brought in to sample (*cheonggukjang,* a fermented soybean stew perceived as a typically

"Korean" food). One of the hosts, prompted by a cue card that had been prepared for him by the

production staff, then delivered the punchline of the "joke": Solar's real name is Kim Yong Sun,

a name that all three hosts instantly associate with the countryside, Korean-ness, and other

ineffable factors related to *cheonggukjang.* In highlighting the difference between her stage name

and her real name, the hosts first question, then verify, Solar's claim to enjoy this dish. Although

Solar does not speak at all during this segment (she is not even present in the same room as the

hosts), the "reveal" of her real name is a performative transgression that reinforces her

authenticity as a Korean woman who enjoys *cheonggukjang.* As Holmes writes, "The heritage of

star and celebrity studies has *long* emphasized how the claim to the 'ordinary' functions as part

of the mythic construction of fame, more often aiming to assuage class resentment than stoke its

fires" (46).

The exploitation of the interplay between "accessibility" and "impossibility" (Marshall

179) is not confined only to the Korean celebrity, the K-pop idol, and the K-pop industry. Fan

producers also mine this "gap" in interesting ways. LiveJournal user grisclair, in a post defending

the practice of RPF, writes:

> The thing about RPF is: there is no way for you to know whether the "source
>
> text" is genuine. For FPF fandoms such as books or TV shows, the source text
>
> is pretty black and white… The source text is predetermined as the "canon" by
>
> the original author. In the case of RPF, the "source text" gets a little muddy.
>
> What we call "canon" in RPF fandom is essentially TV appearances,
>
> interviews, some stalkerish/blurry candid snapshots, anecdotal "fanaccounts",
>
> and such subjective sources. What percentage of these things are scripted,

played up, jokes, lies, or plain misinterpretation by fans? What is the guarantee
that what these celebrities show on camera is how they are like off-camera/in
private life? Fans are just observers trying to interpret this (very choppy, very
unreliable) source text.

This is very similar to Dyer's contention that the film star is a construction "known and
expressed only through films, stories, publicity, etc." (20). Grisclair's account suggests that RPF
writers are well-aware of the fact that both the distance and the intimacy designed to bridge the
distance are constructions, that the "real" personality is as much on-camera as the "stage"
persona. Far from being alienating, however, RPF writers like grisclair see what Marshall calls
the "impossibility of fully entering that world" (179) as productive. Grisclair goes on to write,
"My source text is unreliable and sketchy as fuck. Real Person and Fictional Persona are similar
in superficial characteristics, but the Fictional Persona is absolutely a Fictional Character in my
head. I share this Fictional Character with other people in the same fandom, and we make up a
Collaborative Fantasy Space where our headcanons interact and build our interpretations of these
Real People with personas we happen to love."

The impossibility of a reliable source text – of truly knowing the celebrity on an intimate
level – frees the fan producer from a certain level of commitment to the real. In "'I'm Jealous of
the Fake Me,'" Kristina Busse writes:

… popslash in particular offers such a complex source material that
interpretive decisions about characterization and interpersonal dynamics are
paramount to creating interesting characters. Even though popslashers remain
consumers who interact with the imagined and imaginary media construct, they
also shape and alter the celebrity to their own specifications, making him more

interesting, intelligent, or vulnerable, and thus more desirable, identifiable, and

available. (48-49)

Both grisclair and Busse quote from LiveJournal user Betty P., who claims to write her

characters "in a certain way, a little more thoughtful than they probably are, a little more

genuine, a little more confused. I write them trying harder to get through life than I think they

really are… I write the way I write because it produces a story that I like and not because I think

it mimics reality exactly" (49, italics my own).

This idea that RPF writers see their fictional characterizations of real celebrities as "more

real" than the celebrities itself is taken up in wendelah1's blog post, which is about RPF in the *X-*

Files fandom. That is, instead of writing fanfiction about the *X-Files* characters, wendelah1

writes and reads stories about the actors who appear in that show. (While not pertinent to my

discussion of K-pop, it is interesting to note that both FPF and RPF writers are considered part of

the fandom of the fictional work (e.g. *Supernatural*), as if the actors have little significance for

RPF writers outside of the media work for which they are known. This would bring us back to

Dyer's conflation of the film character with the real actor.) Wendelah1 writes, "… the act of

using [David Duchovny] as a character now feels invasive and wrong, in a way that it didn't

before. I don't know that it is any more wrong, but it sure feels that way… This is really too bad,

because he is a much more interesting character now than he was before. See, this is how writers

think. And maybe it is – kind of exploitative. The truth, though, is I am always looking at the

lives of others and even my own life for the little details I can mine for the work."

Here, wendelah1 is speaking of David Duchovny's public admission of his sex addiction.

Wendelah1's post describes RPF writers' dependence on what I previously described as the

perception of depth, the "'real' lurking *beneath*" (Holmes 58). Celebrities become more

interesting, by these writers' own admission, when they are perceived to have greater underlying problems than "just some fucking rich kid who's all woe is me, my life is so hard" (grisclair). This is what critics of RPF mean when they call RPF exploitative, referring to the perception that fanfiction writers make use of real, personal tragedies to lend their characterizations "greater weight and depth" (grisclair). While this practice does occur, wendelah1 makes clear that this is not what they themselves are doing: "I don't want to know anything about their real lives, because then that makes them actual people in my eyes. I don't want to write about actual people. I want to create a character who seems real, using the public persona of the actor, which is a very different thing." For wendelah1, the "real name" gestures not toward an *a priori* "realness," a core to be excavated within the public persona, but rather toward a realness that is invented by the RPF writer.

One might make a comparison here between these writers and Joshua Gamson's "game players." In his research into the relationship between audience and celebrity, Gamson identified game players as a category of audience who "read the celebrity text as semi-fictional" rather than realistic and are "unconcerned with questions of truth and authenticity. Rather, the celebrity system becomes a source of play" (178). Grisclair's earlier comments also bear a resemblance to Holmes' comments about the "ever-present oscillation" in reality TV programming, in which "viewers have not so much abandoned the '*idea* of authenticity' as they aim to search out the moment when people seem to be 'really' themselves in an unreal environment" (53). Holmes goes on to say that "this structure is in many ways resonant of our relations with the textual construction of celebrity: we understand the mediated nature of the celebrity image, but we are perpetually encouraged to search the persona for elements of the real and authentic, beckoned by the promise of intimate access to their 'real' selves" (53).

This suggests that RPF writers, instead of being characterized as deviant – Sean Redmond writes that "obsessive fans blur and confuse the real and the fictional so that the star or celebrity is imagined to respond to, or get in the way of, their wishes and desires" (34) – should be considered as "an audience highly conversant in the concept of celebrity image production and construction" who are taking up the industry's invitation "not simply to seek out the 'real' self behind the image but also to (apparently) view the processes of fabrication and performance which constitute this entity" (Holmes 62). The "interplay" between accessibility and impossibility that RPF writers take up in their work is the same play that is "actively precipitate[d] by reality television programs as "integral to… viewing pleasure" (Holmes 62). It is a chicken-and-egg scenario: fans' desire to "search the persona for elements of the real and authentic" is inextricably entangled with the industry's desire to capitalize on the "promise of intimate access" (Holmes 53).

Ian McDuff lays out this relationship between fandom and the entertainment industry clearly in his defense of RPS (real person slash). In this essay, McDuff is responding to the critique that fanfiction, which is often sexual in nature, would horrify the celebrity if they came across it: "There are folks who writhe in horror at the thought of virginal little [insert name of favorite boyband member here] stumbling across slash fic on the Net and realizing he stars as the object of mass lust." McDuff continues:

> The whole purpose of [boy bands'] presentation, in short, is to inspire – in order to drive sales of their CDs – fantasies and less-than-innocent longings. Fan fiction of the teeny sort is the end and goal, in a very real sense, of what they do. And what is sauce for the goose is assuredly sauce for the gander. They have invited our fantasies and our writing about them as sexual beings;

and they surely know damned well not all the fans whose libidos they stoke in

the clear-eyed pursuit of royalties are pubescent females whose dreams are of

the lads as straight knights in shining armor.

McDuff goes on to claim that in this view, RPS is more "ethically defensible… than the use of fictional characters" because fictional characters are technically intellectual property. Stacey M. Lantagne argues the same point from a legal perspective in "When Real People Become Fictional: The Collision of Trademark, Copyright, and Publicity Rights in Online Stories about Celebrities." Lantagne suggests that RPF is not only "more legally acceptable under current precedent than more traditional forms of fanfiction" but "also more traditional forms of mainstream storytelling about celebrities" (41). Lantagne observes that this is because RPF reverses the structure of the biopic, which "contains moments of fictionalization but is mainly based around truth" (47). RPF, on the other hand, "contains some moments of truth but is mainly based around fictionalization. Nor does it pretend otherwise… It is, after all, called real person *fiction*, as opposed to more mainstream stories about celebrities that frequently tout being "based on a true story" (47).

At first glance, "In the Territory of the Dragon King," appears to have no connection to the EXO members' "real" lives. None of the EXO members have any significant connection to Jeju Island, the primary setting for the fanfiction work, and the principal characters are drawn from public personalities (i.e. other EXO members and other idols at SM Entertainment) rather than the idols' "non-public" friends and family. Part of Baekhyun's arc in the fanfiction work involves the loss of his friend, Yixing (Lay), who left Korea to move back to China, but the fanfiction work was written long before Lay's effective hiatus from EXO promotions in South

Korea (EmmyKookieMin). (Unlike Tao, Luhan, and Kris, Lay remains nominally part of the group.)

However, the characterizations in the fanfiction work are notably similar to the way EXO members present themselves in their reality shows: Baekhyun is effervescent and talkative (although in curledupkitten's characterization, this masks a deep insecurity about his future) and Kyungsoo is shy and reserved (until he opens up to Baekhyun over the course of the story, like in any good romance novel). While Baekhyun and Kyungsoo's relationship in the fanfiction work is certainly beyond what any reality show would suggest, the close friendship between Baekhyun, Chanyeol, and Jongdae (Chen) in the fanfiction work mirrors the relationship that the three idols show in their reality series. For example, all three idols are the same age and are referred to by fans as the "beagle line" (minjiya). There is also an unexpected pleasure when curledupkitten includes details like Baekhyun being unable to eat cucumbers (Chapter 4), a strong dislike of which the idol has expressed in shows like *Roommate* (SBS Now). Such references act as opportunities for fans to prove they possess what Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis describe as "cultural capital in the form of knowledge… [which] not only allows us to navigate more easily in a mediated world, it is also a form of validation" (30). These nodes of connection reward fans who practice close reading, not only of the text that is the fanfiction work but of the text that is the celebrity. Busse observes that in popslash, "the attempt to imagine a real self as realistically as possible thus requires extensive research, ranging from concert performances and interviews to articles and personal interaction" (*Framing Fan Fiction* 48).

However, this fantasy is founded on "an obvious paradox: it rests on the premise that only the real self can truly love and be loved, while of course the fan obviously fantasizes about the celebrity because of his star status, not in spite of it" (48). RPF writers are performing the

same transgression of authenticity that K-pop stars perform, using "real" personal details to gesture to an interiority that can be explored in the narrative world of the fic. But RPF writers are split on what that interiority signifies: writers like grisclair see that interiority as theirs to invent, complicating the connection between the real name and the star's "real" interiority, while writers like wendelah1 acknowledge the tension between wanting to know more about that "real" interiority as a fan and inventing the "fictional" interiority as a writer. This is ultimately a problem of desire: as McDuff points out, while desire for the celebrity motivates fan practices like writing fanfiction, competing desires (like the desire to write more interesting stories) also soon come to play.

In this chapter, I have argued that RPF writers and the K-pop industry both negotiate transgressions of authenticity. RPF writers are borrowing the stage name/real name construction and its performative transgression from the K-pop industry, but the industry sets up that dialectic because of the existing fan desire for intimacy/authenticity. In order to prove themselves as being authentic, as having depth, K-pop idols move back and forth between the stage name and the real name as the situation requires. That they might do it unconsciously is no less indicative of the industry's willingness to exploit the gap that the stage name/real name dichotomy presents. At the surface level, the K-pop industry continues to espouse a "static" model of celebrity in which stars are essentially ordinary people who occasionally don a "mask" (the "persona") for work purposes, just as a health care worker might put on a surgical mask before an operation. In actuality, the K-pop idol embodies a dynamic model of celebrity in which value is generated through the constant negotiation between the ostentatiously public and the ostensibly private.

RPF writers like McDuff argue that this generation of affective value justifies real person fiction and indeed that RPF is the final destination of the boy band industry's production line of

fantasies. Wendelah1 is more circumspect, suggesting that RPF writers are more attuned to celebrities' "real lives" than their characterizations as obsessive and exploitative might suggest. RPF exists because the entertainment industry's transgression of authenticity depends on fans being savvy media consumers, to "understand the mediated nature of the celebrity image" while being "perpetually encouraged to search the persona for elements of the real and authentic" (Holmes 53).

But RPF writers turn this back on the industry by performing their own transgressions of authenticity. They destabilize the "basic and essential authenticity that a 'real' person is housed in the sign construction" by substituting their own definition of what makes a person "real" (Marshall xlix). Intimacy is not the reward of the transgression of distance but rather an affect that is generated through the act of transgression. In RPF, the real name is the vehicle by which writers "reach back" toward an interiority that is theirs to invent. By using real names in their work, RPF writers both give the lie to their statement that they are only interested in the fictional persona of celebrities and expose the real name for what it is: not a true signifier of the celebrity's interiority, but yet another media construction.

Chapter 2

"Characterizing" K-Pop Idols: Alternate Universes and the K-Pop Concept

The fanfiction work "Phoenix," by AO3 user unniebee, reimagines the EXO members in a sci-fi setting, wherein a spaceship crew "takes on the dangerous job of kidnapping three genetic experiments and bringing them across the galaxy, unaware that the scientist who created them is chasing them." Like "In the Territory of the Dragon King," the idols go by their "real" names (apart from Kris); unlike "Dragon King," all twelve original members of EXO appear in "Phoenix." Kris, Joonmyun (Suho), Chanyeol, Jongin (Kai), Sehun, and Minseok (Xiumin) are crew members on the spaceship *Phoenix*; Zitao (Tao), Luhan, and Kyungsoo (D.O) are the genetic experiments; Yixing (Lay) is the scientist who created them; and Baekhyun and Jongdae (Chen) are crew members on the spaceship *Angel*, hired by Yixing to chase after *Phoenix.*

This fantastic intergalactic setting is not unfamiliar to EXO fans—when the group made their debut in 2012, SM Entertainment marketed them under the conceit that they were aliens from "EXO Planet," each with an "elemental power" (hellokpop). This conceit was not limited to their debut music video, "MAMA," in which they displayed these powers with the help of CGI. The "powers" have also appeared in music videos like "Lucky One" (2016) and "Obsession" (2019) and guest appearances on variety shows ("Episode 159", *Knowing Bros*). This "EXO Planet" setup is frequently referred to as EXO's "debut concept."

In their "Analysis of Global Success Factors of K-pop Music," Kate Seung-Yeon Lee and Min-Ho Chang define the "concept" as an essential component of the production of K-pop groups (9). As examples, Lee and Chang cite albums like *Map of the Soul: Persona* and *Wings* from BTS's discography, whose concepts draw inspiration from philosophy (Jungian psychology) and literature (Hermann Hesse's *Demian*). In *Idolism*, a collection of essays about

K-pop, Korean music critic Mimyo writes that if one has the slightest interest in K-pop, one will be able to conjure a series of vivid images: zombies, voodoo dolls, dystopias. wolves, cheerleaders, industrial spies, mermaids on sale at the grocery store, vampires, wizards, and superheroes (12). These are all examples of real concepts that have been used by one or more K-pop idol groups. The K-pop industry uses the English word "concept" to refer to these setups, but Mimyo suggests that this conception of "concept" originates from the idea of "concept albums" rather than the English dictionary definition of "concept." In K-pop, the concept sets the tone for the music, choreography, costuming, lyrics, music video, album jacket photos, and the performers themselves (13). According to Mimyo, if the idols of the past were "different people" onstage and offstage, the idols of the present further subdivide their "onstage" selves to fit into these multiple fictional universes (23).

In the previous chapter, I argued that both RPF writers and the K-pop industry depend on this perceived dichotomy between the "onstage" and "offstage" selves in order to performatively transgress it in the name of intimacy. In this chapter, I posit that the K-pop concept is less a subdivision of the public self and more an embodiment of this transgression. Drawing from Marc Steinberg's research into the media mix in *Anime's Media Mix* and Hiroki Azuma's database model in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals,* I argue that the K-pop idol is constructed to be a "character," grounding the dynamic negotiation between the "public" and the "not-so-public" in the fixed-yet-flexible matrix of the K-pop idol's body. Furthermore, I compare this process of characterization with the construction of "alternate universes" in fanfiction and the fan practice of "double viewing" as described by Henry Jenkins and Cassandra Amesley (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 66).

Neither "Phoenix" nor "In the Territory of the Dragon King" uses the tag "Alternate Universe," which is broadly defined by Fanlore as "a descriptor used to characterize fanworks which change one or more elements of the source works' canon." It is difficult to ascertain what Fanlore means by this, since almost all fanworks "change one or more elements of the source work's canon," and indeed Fanlore quickly qualifies this definition with a list of common examples: "transplant[ation] of a given source work's characters to a radically different setting, [a] shift [in] the genre in which their adventures occur, and/or [an] alter[ation] of one or more of their professions, goals, or backstories ("Alternate Universe"). This definition assumes Alternate Universe fanfiction to be in relation to a fictional media work, which perhaps explains why neither curledupkitten (chanyeol) nor unniebee use it as a tag. However, I posit that the relation between the source work (the media text) and alternate universe fanfiction is mirrored in the relation between the K-pop idol group and their multitudinous concepts. Both relations are anchored by the "character," who remains constant through changes in setting, genre, and even personal backstory.

Alternate universes are the equivalent fan practice to the K-pop industry's practice of "narrative concepts." Gaya, a writer at *Seoulbeats*, describes the appeal of the narrative concept (also known as a storyline concept) as, "In a market that is so fast-paced that the music feels disposable, having a link between releases is a great way to extend the shelf life of creative goods." (Recall Suk-Young Kim's characterization of K-pop as "Kleenex" pop [7].) Gaya specifically names BTS's *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life* (also known as their *Youth* series) as an example of a narrative concept that they enjoyed: "Even though 'I Need U,' 'Run,' and 'Fire' are distinctly different works, they all successfully incorporate the central theme of youth. And I think that commitment to staying on message is why it resonates with fans." What makes

The Most Beautiful Moment in Life a *narrative* concept, however, is not its thematic commitment to the abstract concept of "youth" so much as an incredibly complex storyline that rewards traditional fan practices like "fan reading," which Henry Jenkins defines as:

> … a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers. Such discussions expand the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption [recall Gaya's comment about "extending the shelf life of creative goods"]. The produced meanings are thus more fully integrated into the readers' lives and are of a fundamentally different character from meanings generated through a casual and fleeting encounter with an otherwise unremarkable (and unremarked upon) text. For the fan, these previously "poached" meanings provide a foundation for future encounters with the fiction, shaping how it will be perceived, defining how it will be used. (*Textual Poachers* 45)

In contrast to their praise for *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life*, the *Seoulbeats* writers are critical of EXO's "superpowers" concept for its lack of coherence. Madi writes, "I totally forgot about Exo's concept. Honestly, if they continued it without being so off and on, they would probably be a group with the longest running concept. Maybe SM felt it couldn't recovering [sic] for a storyline from OT12 to OT9? I have a good storyline you can go with SM about those lost members, so hit me up?" Gaya responds, "I think 'Lucky One' was the attempt at salvaging the superpowers aspect and retrofitting the other MVs into the narrative, but then 'Lotto' happened and I have no idea where we are now." The idea that overall coherence is key to the narrative concept underestimates fans' ability to think of the "narrative world [as] a real place that can be inhabited and explored" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 115). With EXO's latest

comeback marketed as a battle between the EXO members and their evil clones, fans have gone

back to previous albums in order to forge new connections and theorize new narrative threads

(whateverwonwoo). Even for BTS, *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life*, despite its internal

coherence as a series, is part of a larger "BTS Universe" that opens up greater potential for

storytelling and fan interaction (Li 77).

The narrative concept is one example of the K-pop industry's dependence on "transmedia

storytelling," which Henry Jenkins defines in *Convergence Culture* as "[a story that] unfolds

across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable

contribution to the whole (95-96). According to Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is used by

popular artists "to produce more ambitious and challenging works… [while] building a more

collaborative relationship with their consumers" (96). Jenkins cites *The Matrix* as an example of

transmedia storytelling and argues that "for this to work, the [Wachowski siblings] had to

envision the world of *The Matrix* with sufficient consistency that each instalment is recognizably

part of the whole and with enough flexibility that it can be rendered in all these different styles of

representation" (113). Jenkins continues, "The world is bigger than the film, bigger even than the

franchise – since fan speculation and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of

directions" (114).

Jenkins' description of transmedia storytelling hews closely to what Suk-Young Kim

calls "kaleidoscopic pop," in which "the crucial concept of multimedia… is articulated on two

fronts: first as multiple forms of performance, combining acting, singing, dancing, and talk

shows to create a complex array of multimedia performances rather than just a music genre;

second, as the kaleidoscopic convergence of various media platforms (TV, YouTube, live

performance, virtual reality) that collectively make K-pop a transmedia phenomenon" (9). In this

sense, the narrative concept of "EXO Planet," in which a single concept is articulated across multiple forms of performance (music videos, stage performances, variety shows) and across multiple media platforms (TV, YouTube, virtual reality), can be read as a microcosm of the general K-pop experience. In both cases, the kaleidoscope is anchored by the idols themselves: not in their public personas or their private selves but rather as "characters" that embody the performative negotiation between the two.

Fans and academics alike have taken note of the resemblance between K-pop idols and anime characters. In May 2016, *Soompi* published an article titled "15 K-Pop Stars That Are Basically Anime Characters in Real Life." The article describes K-pop idols who are so "ridiculously talented and unrealistically attractive" that they "seem to be too perfect to be real." (Note that "perfection" here has been placed in opposition to the "real," recalling the stage name's function as a marker of both falseness and extraordinariness.) The author of this article relies on visual similarities to make comparisons between various K-pop idols and anime characters, with a particular focus on hair colour—which for idols can change several times in as many months. However, Suk-Young Kim suggests a deeper connection between K-pop and anime when she writes:

> … as artificially constructed agents created to maximize the profitability of
> their performance across media, K-pop idols' physical bodies are heavily
> altered to emulate the ideals of body types that frequent graphic novels and
> animations – the impossibly beautiful bodies that exist on the 2-D surface,
> without any organs, without any flesh or bones that give volume to the body.
> In this respect, holographic bodies are not a radical departure from real bodies

of idols, which are constantly struggling to emulate 2-D aesthetical standards.

(156)

In Kim's view, the mutability of idols' hair colour is a symptom of the K-pop industry's pursuit of "2-D aesthetical standards," making idols' physiological bodies "well disciplined and malleable to outside pressure and needs… after years and years of modification through training, cosmetic surgery, and strict diets… their bodies [are] a vacuous playing field where technology of all sorts can be tested out" (142). In "Real Body, Fake Person," Melanie Piper argues that it is the celebrity's physical body upon which "disparate elements of the star image and their disparate fan readings and anchors in actuality converge" (2.2). In other words, the star's body is "the most obvious visual signifier of that star image as a text."

I bring these ideas about celebrity bodies in conversation with Marc Steinberg's "character theory" (190) and Hiroki Azuma's "database model" (31) to suggest my own theory of the "character-image." In *Anime's Media Mix*, Marc Steinberg defines the character "as a device that simultaneously allows audiovisual media and objects to connect and forces their proliferation" (83). Steinberg names two key attributes of the character: mobility, "a particular combination of name and visual design that is in some sense independent from any particular medium," and communication, "allow[ing] for the communication across media forms and media materialities… abstract because it is always in excess of its particular material incarnations (84). Relying on this definition, I argue that the K-pop idol in RPF fanfiction is not being turned into a character by fans; rather, the industry already considers the idol as a "character-image" that can proliferate across different mediums, anchored by a "particular combination of name and visual design."

Steinberg connects the abstract character to the material toy and writes that "the manga and anime series gave the toy a personality, a narrative setting, a group of characters, a series of set poses, and a voice. In short, the manga and anime character gave the toy 'a world'… In return for its accession to a world, the toy gave the character matter, narrative openness, and movement" (122). In this paradigm, the K-pop concept functions as the "manga and anime series" and the K-pop idol's body functions as the "toy." This is reinforced by Steinberg's statement that "playing, in short, is a little bit like the fan production often celebrated today: children were able to use the existing character to fashion new narratives for themselves" (124). Much of the K-pop concept is rooted in visual signifiers, either in the music video or the stage performance (which is usually broadcast on television and/or circulated online). These visual signifiers open up a "world" that is anchored by the K-pop idol's body, which allows for "narrative openness." This is why EXO can be a motorcycle gang of "rebels" in "Tempo," video game characters in "Power," werewolves in "Wolf," aliens with supernatural powers in "MAMA" and "Lucky One," and soldiers fighting against their evil clones in "Obsession," without losing the sense that they are still *EXO*, the multimillion-dollar K-pop boy band.

This sense is constructed through a combination of the idol's body and images of that body (including changes in hair colour, eye colour, and body shape), the idol's name (both stage name and real name), and a few of the idol's personality traits. While this practice has become less common in recent years, K-pop idols once made this third point of construction even easier for the potential fan by explicitly designating themselves as the "cute one" (usually the youngest member), the "cool one," the "sexy one," or the "responsible one" (usually the leader) ("K-Pop's Archetypes"). These archetypes tended to align more with the idols' physical traits (their age or their physical appearance) rather than their "real" personalities. In a 2019 video, two BTS

members discuss how they acted against their "real" inclinations at the beginning of their career in order to better fit their assigned archetypes (BangtanTV). When RPF writers like grisclair speak of using "public personas" as the basis for their fanfiction characters, they are referring to these archetypes. For example, Baekhyun is always characterized as bubbly and talkative, D.O is quiet and shy but fiercely loyal, and Suho is the responsible and father-like figure. Combined with the name and their body-image—what Steinberg calls "a recognizability maintained through the consistency of character image and design" (143)—these are the "character-images" with which both the K-pop industry and fan producers/consumers are working.

Steinberg also writes of "a powerful combination of commercial repetition and difference," in which interest in anime/manga characters was "sustained both through the periodic introduction of novelty and through the repetitive patterns of movement, poses, and behaviors that maintained the recognizability of the character merchandise" (143-144). The "periodic introduction of novelty" in the K-pop context is the concept, which uses the character-image as an entry point into multiple narrative worlds. Steinberg writes that "the material embodiment of the character is the gateway to its world" (188), but also that the character plays a "regulatory role… in maintaining a degree of consistency across world and variation" (180). This is why EXO's inconsistent application of their "EXO Planet" concept, as mentioned by the *Seoulbeats* writers, does not act as a barrier for EXO fans, as long as the "character-images" of the EXO members are present. When the *Seoulbeats* writer mentions that SM may have had a "crisis of concept" after three of their members left the group, they identify a much greater threat to the EXO universe than any conceptual incoherence between music releases. This threat is visible in unniebee's Author's Note for "Phoenix," in which unniebee states that the fanfiction work was conceived "when OT12 was at their highest high" and that "no events in Phoenix are

meant to mimic or be a commentary on anything that has happened IRL." "Phoenix" imagines the EXO members in a sci-fi setting that is nothing like the "real world" that the "real" members of EXO inhabit, so one might imagine this caveat to be unnecessary. Unniebee recognizes, however, that the loss of Kris, Luhan, and Tao sparks a greater existential crisis among fans and their variations (i.e. their derivative works) than the existence of the variations themselves.

In *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, Hiroki Azuma claims that there is a "deep relationship between the essence of otaku culture and postmodern social structure" (25). Azuma defines otaku as "a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figures, and so on" (3). Azuma and Steinberg therefore share many objects of analysis – in *Anime's Media Mix*, Steinberg is specifically working within the framework of Japanese animation – and Azuma is quoted in Steinberg's book. While Steinberg does not explicitly expand his analysis to other forms of subculture (like K-pop), Azuma makes it clear that his "database model" is not limited to otaku culture but instead indicative of a broader "postmodern subjectivity" (95). Even Steinberg's discussion of the "media mix," though he is referring specifically to Japanese pop culture, has parallels with Suk-Young Kim's characterization of K-pop as a kaleidoscope of "multimedia performance" (9). Steinberg writes, "The experience of the work was no longer based on the appreciation of a single, unified text, as it was to a greater degree with the film or the novel. The experience of a work stretched across media types and genres, including narrative media (film, books), nonnarrative media (stickers, toys, music albums, advertisements), and information or gossip media" (160). Although neither Steinberg nor Azuma mention Korean pop culture in their texts, this is my basis for drawing on these authors to articulate a theory of character-image in K-pop.

To return to Azuma, he posits a "database model" of postmodernity against the "tree model" of modernity. Working with theorists like Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Ōtsuka Eiji, Azuma claims that "in the era of modernity… the world could be grasped, roughly, through a kind of *tree model*… On the one hand, there is the surface outer layer of the world that is reflected in our consciousness. On the other hand, there is the deep inner layer, which is equal to the grand narrative that regulates the surface outer layer" (31). In postmodernity, which Azuma defines as "cultural conditions since the 1970s" (16), there is a disconnect between the surface outer layer and the deep inner layer. The latter does not regulate the former, but rather "the surface reveals different expressions at those numerous moments of 'reading up'" (32). Azuma compares this database model to the Internet, with "an accumulation of encoded information" in the deep inner layer (which he will call the level of the database) and "individual Web pages made in accordance with the users 'reading them up'" in the surface outer layer (which he will call the level of the simulacra) (31-32).

Azuma also discusses the nature of fan production under this "database model." He writes that "consumers in the 1990s consumed only such fragmentary illustrations or settings; and this different type of consumption appeared when the individual consumer empathy toward these fragments strengthened. The otaku themselves called this new consumer behavior '*chara-moe*' – the feeling of *moe* toward characters and their alluring characteristics" (36). Azuma defines *moe* as "originally referring to the fictional desire for characters of comics, anime, and games or for *pop idols*" (47, italics my own). In a database model, where *chara-moe* takes precedence over desire for a grand narrative, "the common ground for all of these [multimedia] projects is neither the authorship of the original creator nor a message but a common world of the work and characters, or, in extreme cases, characters alone" (48).

In alternate universe fanfiction, which retains the characters (or "character-images") but changes almost everything else from the source work, "the narrative is only a surplus item, added to the settings and illustrations (the nonnarrative)" (Azuma 41). To Azuma, this desire for narrative as a "surplus item" does not contradict the "decline of the grand narrative"; instead, the contradiction between "no grand narrative [being] needed in otaku culture" and the "rising desire for a well-constructed narrative that holds readers' (or viewers') attention for a while, emotionally moves them a little, and makes them think a little" actually "most clearly reveals the nature of subjectivity as an agent of database consumption" (75). Azuma calls this subjectivity *dissociative,* in which players of novel games can "wander from relationship to relationship" without ever losing the sense that "'destiny' and 'pure love' with the heroine are emphasized" (84). In *Textual Poachers,* Jenkins mentions a common account of a culture in which "a sense of proximity and possession coexists quite comfortably with a sense of ironic distance" (65). What Jenkins calls the fan desire "to take the program apart and see how it works" is analogous to Azuma's "desire for a grand nonnarrative" (the database) (38). Cassandra Amesley, whose work is quoted in *Textual Poachers*, argues that fans are practicing a form of dissociation that she calls "double-viewing," seeing "fictional characters and their actions as simultaneously 'real' and 'constructed'" (Jenkins 66).

This level of dissociation is also present in the K-pop context. Idols often change their appearance in order to "fit" their latest comeback concept, but other *moe*-elements of their "character-image" remain intact. (Perhaps most importantly, they retain their names, setting K-pop idols apart from the actors playing film roles as described in Dyer's *Stars*.) In EXO's concept-heavy music videos, such as "MAMA," "Power," "Wolf," and "Obsession," their character-images act as vessels to carry fan desire from one narrative world to another. These

character-images work in the same way when fans embark upon modes of fan production such as fanfiction. Timothy Laurie writes:

> These fantasies [depicted in K-pop music videos] are peculiarly productive for online fanfiction cultures, because writers can both build on and depart from the rich semiotic worlds that high-concept videos offer. In the dramatization of glossy objects, persons, and spaces… it anticipates a flutter of stories to come… This provides opportunities for social realism as a creative counterpoint and on websites like *AsianFanFics* K-pop fanfiction supplies details about idols that recast them as ordinary, accessible, and flawed. (220)

Laurie suggests that "realism" in fanfiction acts as a counterweight to the fantastical elements that were introduced to the fan producer by the K-pop industry in the form of "high-concept" music videos. In this sense, the narrative concept encourages both the practice of alternate universe fanfiction and the practice of "reaching back" toward interiority that I discussed in the previous chapter, driving forward the dynamic negotiation that I have argued constitutes the K-pop model of celebrity.

    If we look at some of EXO's "high-concept" music videos, some have more explicit references to the "EXO Planet" concept than others. "MAMA," their debut music video, opens with an extensive English narration (with Korean subtitles):

> When the skies and the grounds were one, the legends, through their twelve forces, nurtured the Tree of Life. The eye of the Red Force created the evil, which coveted the heart of the Tree of Life, and the heart slowly grew dry. To attend and embrace the heart of the Tree of Life, the legends hereby divide the

tree in half and hide each side. Hence, time is overturned, and space turns

askew, the twelve forces divide into two and create two suns that look alike,

into two worlds that seem alike, the legends travel apart. The legends shall now

see the same sky but shall stand on different grounds; shall stand on the same

ground but shall see different skies. The day the grounds beget a single file

before one sky, in two worlds that seem alike, the legends will greet each

other. The day the Red Force is purified and the twelve forces reunite into one

perfect root, a new world shall open up.

It should be noted that there are two versions of "MAMA," one in Korean for EXO-K and one in

Mandarin for EXO-M. The Korean version shows only the EXO-K members and the Mandarin

version only shows the EXO-M members; fans must watch both if they are to assemble a

complete picture of the members' superpowers.

Table 1 EXO's superpowers as seen in "MAMA"

EXO Members	Superpowers
Kai	Teleportation
Suho	Water
Chanyeol	Fire
Baekhyun	Light
Sehun	Wind/air
D.O	Strength/earth
Kris	Flight

Xiumin	Ice/frost
Chen	Lightning
Luhan	Telekinesis
Tao	Time
Lay	Healing

Several motifs are introduced in "MAMA" that fans have used as the basis for subsequent theories. With the help of CGI, each EXO member performs their superpower onscreen. The tree of life is a recurring visual motif, most notably in the choreography and music video for EXO's "Wolf," but otherwise has little to do with their debut concept. The Red Force, an amorphous evil entity, is cited by fans as appearing in videos like "Monster," where the EXO members fight against an anonymous but malevolent threat. The references to "division" and "reunion" explains the separation of subunits EXO-K and EXO-M and teases their eventual combination as "EXO," which took place in 2013. Fans have also redefined the "real-world" departure or absence of members to fit within this worldview; Mirachelle Joya writes that "as to Lay, there is a clever theory that says he is being kept away by the Red Force from his members because he could not be cloned due to his power (healing). Instead, he's being used because he's immune to genetic manipulation and can replicate superpowers."

"Lucky One" was released in 2016, four years after "MAMA," after three members had left the group. "Lucky One" depicts the EXO members as prisoners in a laboratory, trying to escape through the use of their powers. As the *Seoulbeats* writers point out, "Lucky One" is not a natural sequel to "MAMA." They are connected only through the depiction of these "superpowers," which are not extrinsic to EXO but literally embodied by the EXO members.

Even in music videos where the members do not use their powers, the presence of the members' bodies gives their powers a perpetual potential existence. In other words, the superpowers are part of the *moe*-elements that make up EXO's character-image. In an episode of the Korean talk show *Radio Star*, Kai says that he now understands what Lee Soo Man intended when he conceived EXO's sci-fi debut concept, but does not specify in the broadcast what he understood Lee's intention to be ("Episode 651"). I argue that the introduction of superpowers was nothing more than a fantastic extension of the old K-pop archetypes, in which members would be designated as the "cute one" or the "cool one" to make them easier to remember. EXO's debut concept is merely a highly visible example of the process by which K-pop idols undergo characterization.

I also posit that this characterization is important for SM Entertainment in particular, who has played with the idea of rotating membership in idol groups in recent years. NCT (Neo Culture Technology), SM's newest boy group, takes EXO's original "subunit" concept to the extreme, with the idea that "they're a group of infinite members who are constantly shifting into different sub-units in different cities around the world" (SBS PopAsia HQ). SuperM, who released their first album in October 2019, was marketed as the "Avengers of K-Pop," combining "seven members from SM's most successful and still-active groups" (Herman, "Why SuperM…"). In SuperM's debut music video, "Jopping," as well as a teaser video that was released ahead of the music video's premiere, Kai appears to perform acts of teleportation. Although Kai has been placed in a new group context, these acts of teleportation foster Kai's "recognizability maintained through the consistency of character image and design" (Steinberg 143). In the past, being part of the idol group was itself a major part of the idol's character; even if they left the group, idols continued to be referred to as "former members" in the media. In

SM's new business model, idols can switch in and out of different groups, and Kai's superpower helps him maintain consistency of character through this process. (It is perhaps not a coincidence that Kai's power is *teleportation*.) The superpower also acts as a crystallizing point for EXO fans' desire: Kai's act of teleportation in "Jopping" connects SuperM's music video to the "EXO Planet" universe, which fans are always eager to expand.

In *Anime's Media Mix*, Steinberg writes that "the character functions as what… we might call a 'nodal point' or 'media attractor.' The character brings its surrounding media and things into alignment with its image" (44). K-pop idols must become characters in order to proliferate in their multimedia (and multi-concept) environment without losing their structural integrity as entities capable of embodying desire. Similarly, alternate universe fiction exists because of fanfiction characters' ability to act as "nodal points" through which the "pressure" of the source work can act. One of the most serious criticisms that can be levelled against a fanfiction work is "OOC" ("Out of Character"). This is not simply a style issue; it strikes at the heart of what it means to be a fan producer/consumer. In *Textual Poachers,* Jenkins writes that "for most fans, meaning-production is not a solitary and private process but rather a social and public one… Fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community (75-76). Writing "OOC" ignores the socially produced construction of "characters" and opens the fanwork to the troubling question of when a *fan*fiction work becomes simply, a work of fiction. (Crucial to the definition of OOC is that "fan authors… choose which elements of the star image to include, emphasize, or disregard" [Piper 2.2]. Reinterpreting characters' sexualities and/or ignoring their "canon" relationships are not usually considered OOC practices.)

Piper points out the importance of physical bodies in Hollywood biopics as well as RPF, but I consider bodies even more important to alternate universe fanfiction, which must retain the "pressure" of the source text to prevent it from crossing the line from *fan*fiction to "pure" *fiction.* Piper writes that "in appropriating the image of the physical body, the work of the biopic is to present a recognizable facsimile of its subject for the viewers" (6.3) and that "in the written form of RPF, descriptions of the body are used to convey emotions, whether a generalized gesture… [or] something that is particular to the RPF subject, such as Jesse Eisenberg's anxiety and the way it manifests in fan fiction through the description of fidgeting gestures that have been observed in press material" (6.2). If we return to "Phoenix," there are certain physical features that allow for EXO characters to feel just as familiar to readers on a spaceship as on a K-pop stage, such as height (particularly height *differences* between characters) and skin colour.

In conclusion, the multimedia environment of K-pop bears resemblance to not only Steinberg's media mix and Azuma's postmodern society but also to the chaotic world of fan production, in which fans are always redefining what it means to be derivative in a world of variations. The K-pop idol is not so much a persona on top of a "real" self as it is a character that combines aspects of the two. The character is a "character-image" because of the importance of the physical body (and images of it) as a vessel for fan desire. Fanfiction writers are not indiscriminate "remixers," unable to distinguish between originals and derivatives. On the contrary, maintaining their derivative status in relation to a source text is key to their sense of existence. The character holds together in tension fans' desire for change (the concept, the alternate universe) and fans' desire for familiarity (the idols themselves). As I will suggest in the next chapter, this is ultimately why SM Entertainment's turn toward membership rotation is unsustainable. A key aspect of idols' characters lies in their interpersonal relationships with other

members. In the model of celebrity that I am arguing RPF writers and the K-pop industry

espouse, the performative negotiation between the so-called "public" and "private" is grounded

by the idol's character-image. In the next chapter, I add a new element to this embodied model:

the relationship matrixes by which these characters enmesh fan desire.

Chapter 3

Believing in the Unusual: Slash Fanfiction and Homoerotic Fan Service

In the fic "Trial and Error," by AO3 user thesockmonster, the EXO members are reimagined as a pack of werewolves. These characters live in the woods, subsist on a hunter-gatherer diet, and can shift between human and wolf forms. Like wolves, they live in packs, but like humans, they form political alliances. At the beginning of the fanfiction work, Baekhyun's pack is even ruled by a council. However, thesockmonster emphasizes throughout the story that this form of rule is dangerous to the pack – what the pack truly needs is an Alpha.

"Trial and Error" is an example of the subgenre of fanfiction known as "Alpha/Beta/Omega (A/B/O)." Fanlore defines "Alpha/Beta/Omega" as a "kink trope wherein some or all people have defined biological roles based on a hierarchical system." In "Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse," Kristina Busse characterizes "A/B/O" as a "particularly trendy trope at the moment" (she was writing in 2013) that "posits societies where biological imperatives divide people based on wolf pack hierarchies into sexual dominants (alphas), sexual submissives (omegas), and everyone else (betas). Beyond the biologically determined hierarchy, these wolf-like humans often have other wolf-like traits: they may scent their partners or imprint on first sight, and often mate for life" (317). It is not a coincidence that this trope tends to be popular in fandoms that "include animal transformation as canon," with *Harry Potter, Twilight*, and *Supernatural* being prime examples (318-319). The "A/B/O" Alternate Universe (AU) has also proliferated in nonfictional fandoms, including K-pop, and it is of particular significance to EXO, as the group has famously experimented with "animal transformation as canon" in their 2013 music video "Wolf." Fanlore's wiki page on A/B/O mentions EXO by name and suggests that the EXO fandom was largely responsible for the

trope's rise in popularity on *AsianFanFics*. At time of writing, a quick Archive of Our Own

search through EXO fanfiction yields more than 900 works explicitly tagged as

"Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics," more than 100 tagged as "Alpha/Omega Dynamics," and more

than 1050 search results for the word "alpha."

The A/B/O AU's proliferation across multiple fandoms echoes what Kinga Kowalska

refers to as an alternate universe's potential to expand into a "multi-fandom universe where fans

share and play with ideas, utilizing already existing themes and patterns in order to imagine,

fantasize, and tell stories for their own pleasure and that of others" (213). Because the trope

generates "foreknowledge that the characters are destined for each other… deliver[ing] readerly

and romantic satisfaction," it can be "reproduced ad infinitum, exchanging only the surface

details such as characters, circumstances of the reveal, or tone (ranging from angst to comedy)

without endangering the emotional results. Thanks to its established, widely known pattern, the

AU is an easy method of linking the most unlikely pairings with minimal effort…" (215).

Although Fanlore traces the origins of A/B/O to popular readings of animal behavioural science,

A/B/O fanfiction writers today are drawing upon a system that was largely invented by fans and

solidified through constant experimentation by a wide variety of writers and artists working in

different contexts. In Chapter 2, I argued that alternate universes (whether in fandom or in K-

pop) also make use of "existing themes and patterns" (characters) in order to "tell stories for their

own pleasure and that of others." In that sense, a shared AU like A/B/O or "soulmate AU" is a

broader macrocosm of what is happening in the individual AU.

The prevalence of A/B/O even in fandoms with little "canonical" connection to animality

or the supernatural can therefore be attributed to the trope's deep intersection with broader fan

desires. Busse observes that "fandom generally seems to prefer happy over unhappy and soul

mates over one-night stands. So while the fannish desire for intense bonds may not have any canon basis, source texts that celebrate bonding certainly don't hurt" (320). While much fan discourse about A/B/O tends to be about its sexual aspects, Busse writes that "just as important as the kinky aspects of the omegaverse [another name for the A/B/O AU] are the emotional ones: the forcefulness of heat cycles and impulsive desire, the inevitability of imprinting and bonds, the joys and horrors of mpreg [male pregnancy]" (321). At one point in "Trial and Error," Baekhyun observes the couple of Jongdae (EXO's Chen) and Liyin (Zhang Liyin, a Chinese singer/songwriter): "Apparently Liyin had agreed to let him court her and to be there for her heat even if they aren't mated yet. She's going to make him work harder for that final step. Baekhyun approves." The ultimate step of romantic love in "Trial and Error" is not the act of sex ("the heat") but the act of bonding ("the mating").

Busse considers the predominance of this kind of bond in fanfiction as "simply the most extreme form of a trope that habitually collapses the physical and the emotional. It presents readers with a couple whose love is not only unlimited and forever but trustworthy… A marriage vow may only be as good as the participants who utter it, but a bond is forever" (321). In this sense, A/B/O is an extension of the "soulmate AU," which Kowalska defines as "a mode of romance-oriented fan storytelling, which makes use of imaginary worlds where the existence of a predestined romantic match is manifested through physiology" (211). Like Busse, Kowalska observes that the soulmate AU is particularly adapted to fanfiction writers' preference for "slash" fiction: unlike "physiological rules of attraction as means of achieving procreation, therefore excluding homosexuality, soulmarks do not discriminate, and are in fact often used in 'slash' (i.e. queer) pairings" (214). The mating bond is a physical sign (the bond manifests as a bite mark) of an emotional connection that transcends biological imperative: in "Trial and Error," bond marks

can take place between males and males, males and females, females and females, alphas and omegas, omegas and omegas, or even alphas and alphas.

"Slash" forms a key part of Henry Jenkins' discussion of fan production and consumption in his book *Textual Poachers*. Defining slash as "a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists" (186), Jenkins reads the practice as part of a broader tendency in fan culture to look for "negotiation rather than a radical break with the ideological construction of mass culture… [to strive] for a balance between reworking the series material and remaining true to the original characterizations" (220). Although many "traditional" fanfiction reader-writers disavow RPF as a genre, this fannish desire for balance between novelty ("reworking") and familiarity ("true to the original") is reflected in RPF as well.

In "Real Person(a) Fiction," V. Arrow writes that "despite the pervasive idea among other fans that RPF readers and writers want to imagine themselves with their favorite stars, RPF thrives on fans imagining their favorite cute boys with other cute boys" (323). The difference between these two "imaginations" is so great as to threaten the ontological stability of the word "RPF" itself. V. Arrow observes that "66 percent of RPF reader-writers surveyed within the One Direction fandom don't even consider self-insert, wish-fulfilment fanfiction *to be fanfiction*" (326). One of the writers surveyed has "nothing against self-insert on principle" but considers it different from RPF, while another writer considers the insertion of the self to be detrimental to the "certain amount of distance" required to read and write RPF (327). Another writer claims that "the whole point of RPF is that it's fiction." But V. Arrow writes, "While most stories do include (or revolve around) sexual content, the dynamics of the band or pairings are what drive the story, since it is the boys' *real-life interactions* that tempt fans into fandom in the first place" (327, italics my own).

In their essay about the *Super Girl* RPF fandom, Ling Yang and Hongwei Bao write, "While fans seem to be well aware that *Super Girl* GL fanfic is make-believe, they notwithstanding take enormous interest in the fantasies they create. Moreover, they find the game more interesting when the boundary between reality and fantasy is blurred" (851). In the words of one *Super Girl* RPF writer, "The so-called pairing does not mean that something has actually happened between the two characters. It only suggests that you are willing to believe *that there is something unusual between them*" (850, italics my own). Is the "whole point" of RPF that it is real? Or that it is fiction? Two semantic opposites connected by that flexible, fragile word: person(a).

In this chapter, I began with a brief overview of the fan practice known as "slash" and outlined examples of this in K-pop RPF. I now compare this practice with a particular form of fan service implicitly espoused by the K-pop industry: encouraging homoerotic subtext between members of an idol group. I suggest that this type of fan service shares more similarities with "queerbaiting" practices in fictional media fandoms, such as *fujoshi* and Boys' Love *manga*, than "queerbaiting" as practiced by English-language pop stars. I also discuss how the recent rise of "polyamory" as a trope in K-pop RPF reflects fans' meta-awareness of the K-pop group dynamic and argue that the "K-pop idol character" described in Chapter 2 is given meaning through its interpersonal relationships with other members of the same idol group. These relationships, which I call the "intra-group dynamic," acts as a net to "enmesh" fan desire upon the idol character.

In "Representing the Western Super-Minority," David Oh writes of a South Korean TV program called *Non Summit*, a talk show in which "foreign resident men discuss their ethnonational difference and perspective on contemporary issues" (261). Oh describes this show

as a "multinational, homosocial male space… broadcast for national consumption" (261).

Quoting from Sedgwick, Oh goes on to describe homosocial male space as "shared male activity, that is, male bonding that builds fraternal affinities and friendships" (271). I argue that this description is equally applicable to the K-pop boy band. We can think of EXO's group dynamic as a "multinational, homosocial male space" that is not only "broadcast for national consumption" like *Non Summit* (261) but likewise "resolves possible fissures through humor and the articulation of shared heteronormative masculinity" (263). In *Non Summit*, the male bond is primarily depicted through "teasing and mocking humor," but "because homosociality evokes the specter of homosexuality, [the cast members'] heterosexual identities and their masculine identities needed to be secured" (271-272). Instead of "engag[ing] in rowdy adolescent humor" or "espous[ing] overt sexism," however, *Non Summit* "produces an assumed heterosexuality as a site of male bonding and shared connection," in which "shared heterosexuality is primarily represented in the men's conversations about attractive women and their heightened sexual interest when a woman guest makes an appearance" (272-273).

The homosocial space of the K-pop boy band is more complicated than this, however, because the production of "assumed heterosexuality" is deeply affected by constructions of masculinity. Sun Jung observes that in 2009, it was common for male idols to perform hit songs by female idols (and vice versa, though only the former is referred to as "cross-dressing") (163). Jung suggests that the popularity of girl groups and girl group songs in 2009 sparked the rise of these "transgender role-playing practices," in which male idols wore "wigs and miniskirts" to imitate performances like Brown Eyed Girls' "Abracadabra" and Girls' Generation (SNSD)'s "Gee." 2AM's Jo Kwon in particular made a name for himself as "queen of the girl group mimickers" (164). At the same time, 2008 marked the rise of boy bands who "claim[ed] to

embody 'beastlike' masculinity, such as 2PM, B2AST, and MBLAQ." 2PM in particular displayed "dynamic acrobatic and b-boy dance styles" to "[maximize] their tough manly images" and performatively set themselves apart from boy bands who "practically emphasize their pretty boy (*kkonminam*) features" (164). Jung views the dissonance between 2PM's stage performances, which "demonstrate sexy and tough masculinity by often showing off their well-toned muscular bodies," and their game show appearances, in which they often "crossdress and perform cute dances of girl groups," as an embodiment of what she calls the South Korean boy band's "manufactured versatile masculinity" (165).

As Timothy Laurie observes in "Toward a Gendered Aesthetic of K-Pop," K-pop group dynamics are consciously set up by the industry as homosocial spaces. Laurie writes that "K-pop's idol communities are fundamentally homosocial" and that "one can only be disappointed by defunct mixed gender K-pop groups like Sunny Hill, Co-Ed School, and F1RST. After a series of costly false starts, each of these groups has been forced to disaggregate into homosocial units. As a marketing device, the split between girl groups and boy groups has been central to K-pop's global circulation" (219). As this limits the potential for visibly heterosexual interactions, the "versatile masculinity" of the *kkonminam* (꽃미남, literally "beautiful flower man") works to "disseminat[e] new images of male bodies [and create] space for a vibrant aesthetic imaginary around male fashions, friendships, and intimacies" (222). Unlike the "social archetype" of the "brutish tough guy image," which constrains certain forms of emotional expression between group members, the *kkonminam* is closely associated with "'skinship,' where physical contact between (mostly same-sex) idols is tracked [by fans] as a subterranean sexual economy" (222). The group's homosocial space and the members' versatile masculinities work in concert with a projected female heterosexual audience to create a medium in which it is considered a form of

fan service for men to act like women. In "Unmasking Queerness," Chuyun Oh and David Oh discuss "cross-dressing [as] one of the most popular conventions in the mainstream K-pop industry," where "male singers' cross-dressing is particularly beloved by (mostly female) fans" (9). Furthermore, Oh and Oh contend that "in K-pop, androgyny and male cross-dressing are considered neither an absence of masculinity nor homosexuality," a liminal homosocial space in which men interact fantastically with other men for a female audience (9).

An example of this with EXO is in the video "The One," which was played at one of EXO's concerts ("EXO PLANET #3 – The EXO'rDIUM") and subsequently uploaded to SM Entertainment's official YouTube channel. This video was specifically produced by SM Entertainment for EXO's fans, lending its contents a veneer of authoritative approval. (The same goes for the "fanfiction-esque" content in *EXO Next Door.*) The clip, which played between sets at the concert while the EXO members changed outfits backstage, stars Chen, Baekhyun, and Xiumin (who make up the EXO subunit known as EXO-CBX) as a group of youths who hang out outside the stadium in which EXO's concert is taking place and lightheartedly harass the various people they meet there. These "various people," represented by different costumes and props, are actually all played by EXO's Suho. Near the end of the video, Chen, Baekhyun, and Xiumin view from behind what appears to be a beautiful woman. At this point, given the setup, fans are led to believe that this woman isn't "really" a woman, but Suho again in disguise. When Baekhyun approaches her, the "woman" turns around to reveal that "she" is Baekhyun in cross-dress.

Oh and Oh suggest that when male idols cross-dress selectively (i.e. when certain members of the group cross-dress and others don't), it reinforces an element of "heightened homoerotic tension," which is often already present in some degree due to the members'

"androgynous appearance and too intimate physical contact on and offstage" (21-22).

Specifically, Oh and Oh describe a homoerotic element that is present in a duet performance

between INFINITE's Sungyeol and Sungjong but not in VIXX's drag performance of Wonder

Girls' "So Hot," primarily due to the latter's tendency toward "parody" and "humor" (23). Just

as humour defuses the threat of homosexuality in *Non Summit*, humour works to reinscribe

assumed heterosexuality even when those assumptions have been deliberately provoked.

Baekhyun, Chen, and Xiumin being attracted to a cross-dressing Suho is one thing; Baekhyun's

shocked reaction at seeing himself as a woman is another. (It is worth noting that it is not clear

what Baekhyun's reaction is supposed to be; the fan Army One It commented under the video,

"It's 2019 and I'm still confused if [B]aekhyun was so impressed by his own beauty or scared.")

Even when homoerotics is present in some degree, Oh and Oh point out that "K-pop cross-

dressing is considered as *nori* – entertaining play for mainstream audiences. This apolitical

aspect of *nori* assures the audience that K-pop cross-dressing is nothing but an amusement,

which is often called a 'fan service'" (24).

To some fans of K-pop, this type of fan service is considered a form of "queerbaiting." In

"Queerbaiting and Real Person Slash," Clare Southerton and Hannah McCann observe:

> … while discussion of queerbaiting has often focused on fictional
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> representation in popular culture, this term is also sometimes used in reference
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> to celebrities. Celebrities who are not openly LGBTQ+ but hint at sexual
>
> experimentation through language, action, or the use of symbols (such as
>
> rainbows) open themselves to allegations of marketing to queer audiences
>
> while safely maintaining their status as "straight." (161)

This definition of queerbaiting, which Southerton and McCann have constructed with the example of One Direction's Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson in mind, does not quite apply to the homosocial space of the K-pop boy band. SM Entertainment did not produce "The One" with a queer audience in mind but rather a female heterosexual audience.

"Queerbaiting" in K-pop is closer to "queerbaiting" in fictional media representations, which Divya Garg describes as "media producers' tendencies to introduce or build up on homoerotic subtext, then dash the hope of ever actualizing that subtext on-screen, often by inserting some sort of 'no homo' joke" (164). Timothy Laurie points out that "there are few openly gay male K-pop performers, and politically oriented activisms around gay and lesbian issues in South Korea continue to be blocked by powerful Christian lobbies, themselves linked to media outlets like newspapers and television" (222). A *Seoulbeats* article by Dana, "Why Homoerotic Fanservice Is Just Not Okay," articulates some fans' fears that homoerotic fan service trivializes the real sociopolitical issue of LGBTQ+ rights in South Korea. Moreover, the fact that this fan service is clearly targeted at female fans puts it in the same line of discourse as *fujoshi*, a "largely heterosexual female audience" that consumes male/male content in Japanese anime and manga (Garg 164). In *fujoshi* culture, "the idea is that media creators specifically provide erotic content to reward fans and promote sales/and or maintain loyalty," and it is frequently criticized for "replicating heterosexual paradigms within homosexual relationships" (165). Garg makes a close association between *fujoshi* culture and slash fic: "The writers and consumers of slash fiction are often heterosexual women, which brings it perhaps closer to an understanding of *fujoshi* (though there are certain elements that are distinct in terms of the content that it promotes) with regards to the 'recognition by producers of the profitable potential of catering to female interest in male eroticism'" (165). It is along similar lines that RPF writers

like grisclair argue that "shipping" is a natural part of K-pop fandom. Without going so far as to posit a causal relationship between "slash" and "homoerotic fan service," I argue that there are enough similarities between the two to suggest that they come from the same fannish desire to believe in "something unusual" between two people, as the *Super Girl* fan put it (Yang and Bao 850).

Or more than two people, as the case may be. On the Archive of Our Own, the fandom with the most fics under the tag "Polyamory" is the K-pop boy band BTS. Both "Trial and Error" and "Phoenix" are tagged as "Polyamory" fics. In the book *Polyamory, Monogamy, and American Dreams*, Mimi Schippers examines how "media representations of poly relationships, from polygamy and polyamory to sexual relationships in campus hookup cultures and sex clubs, portray nonmonogamy as un-American, unsustainable, a curious anomaly, an immature phase, or, in some cases, as a viable choice or a political alternative to heteronormative monogamy" (1). Schippers defines "poly" broadly as "relationships between more than two adults who feel an affinity toward or kinship with each other, and they share some kind of mutual, if temporary interdependence and responsibility" (1-2). By design, Schippers' definition is extremely broad: stripped of the controversial "poly" label, it could easily apply to any group of friends or family members. I am interested in its application to the K-pop idol group, whose intra-group dynamic cannot be easily classified into typical friend/colleague/family configurations.

In "Trial and Error," polyamory takes the form of a minor subplot in which Sehun, an omega, falls in love with a mated alpha-alpha couple, Luhan and Minseok (Xiumin). It is "unusual" for an omega to be bonded to two alphas, just as it is unusual for two alphas to be bonded together, but the pack eventually accepts this strange arrangement. In "Phoenix," the "poly" relationship is much more crucial to the narrative arc of the fanfiction work. The story

begins by establishing Chanyeol and Kris as a married couple aboard the titular spaceship

Phoenix. Kris is the captain of the ship and its crew of mercenaries; Chanyeol is the ship's

engineer. *Phoenix* is hired to destroy a lab and kidnap three genetic experiments being kept there,

one of whom is Kyungsoo (D.O). The experiments soon escape their cells and hide from the

crew of the *Phoenix*, giving each experiment an opportunity to establish a bond with a different

crew member. Kyungsoo's initial bond is with Chanyeol, and it is this bond that moves Kris to

reconsider the parameters of his mission and start thinking of the "experiments" as people in

need of protection.

     This echoes Mimi Schippers' analysis of the "poly" relationship in the film *Catching*

Fire, wherein the female protagonist (Katniss) "forms romantic and political alliances" with two

male characters (Gale and Peeta) (8). Schippers characterizes this relationship as one in which

"their mutual interdependence and sense of responsibility to each other and their affective ties

bind them together as three and in ways that extend beyond romance and sexual desire – they

need each other to survive, and they are political allies" (8-9). In the case of "Phoenix," however,

Kyungsoo's survival depends on his ability to win Chanyeol over—that is, to establish an

affective tie with him. Chanyeol and Kris already have a well-established affective tie, so

Kyungsoo's new bond with Chanyeol has implications beyond a simple one-to-one relationship.

Kyungsoo needs Chanyeol for his own survival, but cannot risk putting Chanyeol's relationship

with Kris in danger for the same reason. On the other hand, Chanyeol recognizes that his bond

with Kyungsoo gives him the responsibility to renegotiate his relationship with Kris. Kris and

Chanyeol are married, but they are also captain and crew member, and Chanyeol's new bond

gives him the impetus to challenge Kris's authority for the first time.

Both D.O/Chanyeol and Chanyeol/Kris were popular "ships" in the EXO fandom at the time (supaari), and Palmer Haasch suggests that polyamorous "ships" might arise from fans' collective indecisiveness about which "ship" to support (41). In Haasch's case, she is talking about BTS, a boy band with an odd number of members (seven) that renders a "perfect pair-off" impossible. EXO debuted with an even number of members (twelve, six in each subunit) and currently has an odd lineup (nine), but realistically this tends to be in flux: Lay has not promoted with the group in years, reducing their practical lineup to eight. As of May 2020, Xiumin, D.O, and Suho have begun their mandatory military service, bringing that number down to five (D. Kim, "EXO Sends…"; J. Lim, "EXO Members…"). In January 2020, Chen announced that he was getting married and that his fiancée was expecting a baby, making his participation in future EXO comebacks an open question (U. Kim).

"Phoenix" was conceived during the "OT12" era, as unniebee explicitly states, but it is possible to see how polyamory might be a practical choice for fanfiction reader-writers who are navigating a precarious lineup in which members might leave at any moment. Nonetheless, the arrangement in "Phoenix" leaves one of the EXO members (Baekhyun) without a partner. This is solely in a romantic sense, since Baekhyun has a work relationship with both Jongdae (Chen) and Yixing (Lay). In Chapter 25, there is a scene in which Baekhyun and Jongdae discuss the impact that Yixing's arrival has on their partnership. After it has become apparent that Jongdae and Yixing's relationship has turned romantic, Jongdae promises Baekhyun, "I like him. I admire him. But he's not my partner. That's you. Always." Although Jongdae and Baekhyun are not romantically involved, this is not a significant departure from Kyungsoo's initial relationship with Chanyeol and Kris, in which Chanyeol and Kris are "always" partners even as Chanyeol

realizes he "likes" Kyungsoo. This complexity about what constitutes a "poly" relationship in K-pop fanfiction echoes the complex group dynamics of the K-pop idol group.

Because EXO's member lineup has undergone several high-profile departures, EXO fans (known officially as EXO-L) are particularly anxious about this group dynamic. In October 2017, ZYXMYG, an *Allkpop* forum user, uploaded several "proofs" of the EXO members' "real" friendships with each other in a post sarcastically titled, "exo: robots with business friendships and absolutely no emotions whatsoever." The title of this post is meant to poke fun at people who believe the EXO members have a strictly "business" relationship, but also suggests that the EXO members *must* be friends by sheer virtue of having emotions at all. Much of these "proofs" are seemingly candid photos in which the members are physically close with each other, either touching or going on trips together. This suggests that Laurie's "subterranean sexual economy," in which fans closely track the evidence of physical contact between same-sex idols, is not confined to those fans who would interpret these actions as acts of sexual intimacy. On the contrary, it seems that proof of intimacy, whether romantic or sexual or platonic, is an existential question for the entire fandom.

In response to ZYXMYG's post, LadyS wrote, "I appreciate your feelings about this but honestly, it does happen that some idols are just coworkers. There's this stigma that if idols aren't friends with [each other] they must hate [each other] lmao no. Remember school? I don't think you were best friends with your whole class but I don't think either you hated all of them." Another user, sonemariam, wrote, "I've said this before and I'll say it again, EXO members are friends with each other. And some are bffs while others are not. And just like a family, they fight, break up and make up. That's it. Those who say they're just business partners are either envious or jealous of my boys and this is my message to such people: PLEASE GET A LIFE

AND LEAVE MY BOYS ALONE. IF YOUR FAVS ARE JUST BUSINESS PARTNERS, IT

DOESN'T AUTOMATICALLY APPLY TO EXO."

Neither LadyS nor sonemariam seem to be able to decide whether idols in the same group should be considered colleagues or classmates, friends or family. LadyS compares the "business" relationship between idols to both "coworkers" and "classmates," while sonemariam describes EXO as simultaneously "friends" and "family." These responses suggest that the key question is not whether idols are "really" friends but whether it is possible to be a fan of a group that is not what it appears to be on camera. What LadyS characterizes as the "stigma that if idols aren't friends with [each other] they must hate [each other]" is the recognition that, if idols are not friends with each other *as they appear to be onscreen*, then they must hate—not necessarily each other, but their fans, by denying them the "intimate depths" that I discussed in Chapter 1. In this sense, RPF writers would seem to put *fewer* expectations on idols rather than the reverse by not demanding that the "inner" (the private, the real) aligns perfectly with the "outer" (the public, the fictional).

Idols have also been known to define their relationships with each other in the context of "family." In the first episode of *Bon Voyage Season 4*, the BTS members return from vacation and discuss how they feel after seeing each other again for the first time in a month ("Ep. 1"). Several members use the word "family" here to characterize their group dynamic. This gains a level of complexity when one considers that this conversation is happening at the same time as the members' discussion of what they did during their vacation, which involved spending time with their families. This second use of the word "family" precludes the BTS members, since they make it clear that they have not seen each other for a month, but also relegates their "real" families to a secondary status in which they are visited only during vacation times. Like

"primary" family members, the BTS members live together (the first episode opens inside their shared apartment), but unlike many family members, they also work together. (Despite *Bon Voyage*'s carefulness to appear "candid," the conversation about "what they did on their vacation" makes it quite clear that filming this show is part of their job).

Unlike "colleagues," "friends," or "family," it is rare that an idol will use the term "classmate" to designate their relationship with the other members of their group. Fans, on the other hand, frequently make this comparison. In addition to the posts described above, Tumblr user EXO FT. KYUNGSOO wrote in a blog post in 2016:

> Yes, there were times when members appear to be annoyed with [Tao], because of his whiny personality, which can rub people the wrong way. This was especially evident when it came to Kyungsoo [D.O], who doesn't bother hiding his anger and irritation. Nonetheless, Kyungsoo did have interactions with Tao which didn't end up with the former getting annoyed. It's just like how in a class, you have that annoying classmate whom you sometimes just want to slap, but is a nice person to talk to or interact with most of the time.

The comparison is understandable, given that idols spend years training alongside each other in a school-like system. Many idol groups, particularly early on in their careers, deploy the "high school student" concept, in which school uniforms become stage costumes and music videos contain themes like peer pressure, anxiety over the future, and first love (e.g. "No More Dream" by BTS, "Growl" by EXO, "Rough" by GFRIEND). Nonetheless, "classmates" is still a rare term for idols to use to refer to each other. Part of the reason for this may be that idol groups contain members of different ages, in contrast to a "real-world" classroom setting in which most

of the students would be assumed to be peers of the same age. But another reason may be that the term "classmates" implicitly contains the idea of "graduation."

Part of the anxiety over the K-pop group dynamic is due to the fact that the K-pop group has a fixed time limit. Most idol contracts are seven years in length; once this initial contract expires, it is very rare that all the members of a group will renew with the same agency (AGENCY). Part of EXO fans' anxiety to "prove" the strength of EXO's group dynamic may stem from the fact that they cannot even depend on this economic tie to hold the object of their affection together, not after Kris, Luhan, and Tao's public contract disputes with SM Entertainment (JiwonYu). In another *Allkpop* thread, haylucky commented, "I find [SM] ridiculous for having Lay and Kai have dance duos since they behave like they don't know each other." Unseen responded, "I kind of feel that Chen, Baekhyun and Chanyeol are the ones who hold the group together." For fans, it is neither the record label nor the act of performing together on stage that "holds a group together," but rather the members' interpersonal relationships. This might explain the struggles of a girl group like 9 Muses. Their management agency, Star Empire, instituted a "graduation system" in which 9 Muses' lineup was always in flux; Hark-Joon Lee and Jeong-Hwan Kim argue that this graduation system encouraged the trainees to aim to replace their predecessors and sowed the seeds for subsequent conflict within the group (66).

SM Entertainment also instituted a "graduation system" for one of their NCT subunits, NCT Dream. NCT Dream was built around the concept of "teenagers," meaning that members had to "graduate" once they reached the age of 20 (D. Kim, "Mark Confirmed…"). The first member to graduate was Mark, who left NCT Dream in 2018 (S. Park) but continued to be active in other NCT subunits as well as SM Entertainment's project group SuperM ("Mark"). In 2020, more than half of NCT Dream's lineup (Renjun, Jeno, Haechan, and Jaemin) were set to turn 20

(Vanbun). When NCT Dream held their first solo concert in 2019, Jisung reportedly "cried continuously as this could be his last concert with the members." NCT fans, known as NCTzens, took to social media to express their dissatisfaction with NCT Dream's graduation system and the uncertainty it caused. In April 2020, SM Entertainment announced that they would be abolishing the graduation system and Mark would return to the lineup for the group's future activities (D. Kim, "NCT Dream Announces…").

In Chapter 1, I argued that the K-pop idol negotiates between the public persona and the private self, both of which are constructions pieced together from fragmented media texts. In Chapter 2, I posited that this negotiation was anchored by the idol's character-image, composed of images of their physical body and certain core character traits associated with that body. The conception of idols as "characters" allows for the deployment of "alternate universes" in fanfiction and "concepts" in the K-pop industry. In this chapter, I argued that it is the intra-group dynamic, the network of interpersonal relationships within a single idol group, that acts as a "net" to enmesh fan desire upon the "character" described in Chapter 2. If "shipping" comes from the desire to believe in "something unusual" between two people (Yang and Bao 850), then the K-pop group dynamic is by its very nature "unusual," not quite definable by labels such as "family" or "classmate" or "colleague."

As the *Allkpop* forum posts suggest, the belief in "something unusual," whether romantic, sexual, platonic, legitimizes fan desire. If the intra-group dynamic is not "real," if the intra-group relationship is strictly "business," then fannish desire loses part of its foundation. In this context, the rise of the "polyamory" trope in K-pop RPF may reflect the growing instability of this dynamic through the concurrent rise of rotating lineups. RPF writers use the "polyamory" trope to reinscribe the dynamic to be more adaptable and flexible in the face of an unstable milieu.

Like Schippers' "poly" relationships, the intra-group dynamic depends on a multitude of relationships that are both affective ("feel an affinity toward or kinship with each other") as well as economical ("mutual, if temporary interdependence and responsibility"). In "shipping" two or more characters, fans are trying not so much to force idols into non-consensual relationships but to stabilize the relationship between the idols and themselves (also both affective and economical). If we cannot believe in "something unusual" between members of an idol group, then why be fans of the group at all?

Conclusion

Over the past three chapters, I have compared three fan practices (the use of real names, the construction of alternate universes, and "slash" shipping) to three industry practices (the use of stage names, the deployment of concepts, and homoerotic fan service). I have cited examples of these practices in K-pop fanfiction and in the K-pop industry and used these examples to build a larger argument about fannish behaviour and the celebrity text. In the following section, I present a condensed version of this argument and reiterate some of the key concepts that I have outlined.

"RPF," or "real person fiction," is the practice of writing fanfiction about real (i.e. non-fictional) people rather than fictional characters. The genre has become increasingly visible in fandom culture over the past decade, but remains a controversial practice even within fanfiction communities. In my thesis, I have sought to reclaim RPF from its "transgressive" reputation by arguing that K-pop RPF is part of general fannish behaviours that are adopted and encouraged by the K-pop industry. To do this, I have proposed a new model of the celebrity text that is reflected by these fan and industry practices, one in which affective value (i.e. intimacy) is generated through the performative transgression of the "public" and the "private." This transgression is embodied in the "character-image," a property of the K-pop idol that allows him to proliferate across multiple media forms and formats, and is given meaning through the idol's interpersonal relationships with the other members of his group. These interpersonal relationships also function as a "net" to "enmesh" fan desire upon the character-image.

I envision this model as a perpetual motion machine that moves back and forth between an artificial boundary (the so-called "public/private" divide) to generate energy (affective value). This machine is enclosed within the flexible matrix of the character-image, which I imagine (in

the vein of Marc Steinberg's work on the Atomu sticker in *Anime's Media Mix*) as a sticker, capable of transplantation in different mediums without losing its essential form. The network of interpersonal relationships, which I have called the "intra-group dynamic," is the "sticky" side of the sticker that attracts and focuses both the fan desire for experimentation and the fan desire for establishment.

I have deployed the term "K-pop industry" to refer to a network composed of various nodes, including but not limited to management agencies, record labels, other corporate entities, members of the TV/film/entertainment industries, the mass media, the K-pop idols themselves, and the South Korean state. I have used the word "network" in a Latourian sense to reflect that although I use the language of intention when I write about the K-pop industry, this perception of "intent" is in fact a series of networked associations and disseminations that distributes the question of agency across the broader structure. I have chosen to write about K-pop RPF because of its growing prominence within the RPF genre, but also because of what Suk-Young Kim has called its multimodal nature. Within K-pop RPF, this thesis has focused on the boy band EXO, partly because of my personal experience with the fandom and partly because of SM Entertainment's outsized impact on the South Korean entertainment industry. Furthermore, I have read the K-pop RPF phenomenon in the lineage of Anglophone fandom studies, and therefore focused on how English-speaking K-pop fandom has interpreted the K-pop celebrity text.

In the first chapter, I outlined how the stage name functions as a marker of extraordinariness that creates a sense of distance between the celebrity and the fan. I then discussed examples of EXO and other K-pop idols using the "real" name to performatively transgress that distance. This is a transgression in pursuit of authenticity, a conscious traversing

of distance in order to generate a sense of "real" connection. I referred to this sense as "intimacy," the reaching-back toward an interiority that may or may not exist as presented (the "private self" to which fans have access is still a semi-public constructed text). When RPF writers use celebrities' real names, despite their claims to be working with "public personas" rather than "private selves," RPF writers are not seeking the "private self" so much as the generative potential of this affective connection. Instead of being deviant from the norm, RPF writers are highly skilled players in the negotiation of the celebrity text.

In the second chapter, I argued that RPF writers do not "turn" K-pop idols into characters so much as the K-pop industry already perceives and propagates the K-pop idol as such for the purposes of transmedia storytelling. In alternate universe fanfiction, fanfiction writers follow Hiroki Azuma's "database model," in which characters and character traits retain affective value over grand narratives and authorial ownership. In the context of the K-pop concept, the K-pop idol's body possesses what Marc Steinberg describes as the anime toy's ability to open up narrative worlds while retaining stability of form. I have called this power the "character-image" and it functions as a combination of the idol body, images of that body, the stage and real names, and a few core character traits. The character-image holds in tension two competing fannish desires: the desire for novelty (for new narrative worlds and media to explore) and the desire for stability (for one's object of affection to retain the qualities responsible for that affection in the first place). I concluded this chapter by offering an example of how EXO underwent this characterization in their initial narrative concept, the "EXO Planet."

In the third chapter, I posited that it was the intra-group dynamic—the network of interpersonal relationships between the members of an idol group—that imbued the character-image with meaning. I outlined this argument through comparing the practice of "slash"

shipping, which has its origins in fictional media fan work, to homoerotic fan service as practiced by male idols. I argued that the K-pop idol boy band functions as a "homosocial space" in which the ordinary rules of gender and sexuality are temporarily suspended, albeit for an assumed heterosexual female audience, which leaves the space vulnerable to accusations of "queerbaiting." Quoting from the work of Ling and Bao, I suggested that both slash shipping and homoerotic fan service stem from the basic belief in "something unusual" in the intra-group dynamic, which forms the basis for fannish desire. In other words, the intra-group dynamic functions as an important network to enmesh fan desire and create lines of alignment and misalignment along which the individual character-image can develop (e.g. height *differences*, characters who *clash*).

In conclusion, the fact that fans were so quick to point out the similarities between the SM Entertainment-produced web drama *EXO Next Door* and EXO fanfiction, as well as common terms like "fan service," suggest that it is well-known among fans and critics that the K-pop industry is highly attuned to fan practices and behaviour. When I set out to define K-pop at the beginning of this thesis, I named the "intense fanbases" as a core attribute of the phenomenon. Therefore, it is not wholly surprising that there is an alignment between fan and industry practices. However, this alignment is embedded within existing networks of power, which might explain why web dramas like *EXO Next Door* fly largely under the radar while RPF remains a source of agitation for many fans. This would be a question of format, in which SM Entertainment's authoritative position lends the web drama a veneer of legitimacy that the online fanworks on AO3 do not possess.

But there is also a question of content. A direction for future research might be in investigating the question of whether sexual and violent content, a staple of most fanfiction

genres, affects people's perceptions of RPF. Would RPF be considered acceptable if it was completely devoid of such content? Acceptable by whom? Fanfiction, whether it is based on fictional or real characters, walks a fine line between *fan* and *fiction*. In this thesis, I have tackled the question of RPF in order to argue that all fanwork, and all the creative industries that depend on such fanwork, struggles to balance the competing desires of familiarity (fan) and novelty (fiction). How far can a fanfiction work go before it is no longer "fan" nor "fiction"? And how far can the K-pop industry go in accommodating these competing desires?

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