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Toward a Multisensorial Semiotic Linguistics: Embodied Affect and Mediatization in  
Transnational Korean Popular Culture

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Linguistics

by

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June 2021

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Toward a Multisensorial Semiotic Linguistics: Embodied Affect and Mediatization in  
Transnational Korean Popular Culture

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by

Joyhanna Yoo Garza

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## ABSTRACT

### Toward a Multisensorial Semiotic Linguistics: Embodied Affect and Mediatization in Transnational Korean Popular Culture

by

Joyhanna Yoo Garza

This dissertation investigates the circulation of Korean popular cultural genres both online and offline among producers and their consumer-fans in the transnational encounters of South Korea, Mexico, and the United States. This project reveals how global flows of capital mediated by technology are profoundly tied to everyday embodied praxis. Each of the dissertation's analytic chapters, written as standalone articles, focuses on a different genre of Korean popular culture. The first chapter examines K-pop cover dances, or fan recreations of meticulously choreographed K-pop dance performances. The second genre, *mukbang*, is an online category of spectacular eating shows in which performers document themselves consuming copious amounts of food, sometimes while interacting live with fans. Finally, K-beauty content includes website and interview analysis of young Korean American women who discuss Korean cosmetic and beauty products, trends, and practices.

My analysis reveals that race, gender, and national identity are reconfigured in unexpected ways in these performances as part of the creation of a vicarious experience of bodily pleasure for viewers. For instance, male K-pop dancers in Mexico perform feminized Korean 'cuteness' through linguistic pronouncements of love and gestures, challenging local

hegemonic notions of masculinity while shaping the contours of a local K-pop subculture. Online eating stars engage in complex multimodal work to create a pleasurable visual and sonic experience for their viewers. These online actors perform technologically mediated care work by evoking smell, taste, and texture for viewers through language and embodied displays. Korean American K-beauty entrepreneurs position themselves as cultural experts by discursively linking a nostalgic Korean past to recent trends in skincare.

I further show that language takes on sensory qualities through performers' affective work, which is often performed in racialized and gendered forms, promoting online circulation as well as offline affective resonance with the viewer/consumer. Such performances highlight the roles of language, materiality, and embodied action in crafting mediated care and sociality online. By treating language as one component of a much more complex system involving multiple senses and modalities, my work champions what I call a *multisensorial semiotics* that extends to virtual spaces. Such an approach theorizes language as embodied and affective and entails analytic attention to multimodal interaction as well the prominence of the senses in mediatized performances.

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## Chapter 1: Toward a multisensorial semiotic linguistics

### *Introduction*

This dissertation investigates the engagement of Korean popular cultural genres both online and offline among producers and their consumer-fans in South Korea, Mexico, and the United States. This project reveals how global flows of capital mediated by technology are profoundly tied to everyday embodied praxis. More significantly, this work examines the semiotics of language and embodied performances and their accompanying ideologies vis-à-vis race, gender, nationality, and personhood. While each chapter is written as a standalone article, the dissertation as a whole encapsulates how these Korean popular cultural forms are consumed and circulated by young people in various contexts ranging from South Korea, Mexico, and the United States.

Each of the analytic chapters focuses on a different genre of Korean popular culture. Chapter 2 examines K-pop cover dances, or fan recreations of meticulously choreographed K-pop dance performances. I examine the performance of K-pop fandom by young Mexican men, which they achieve both discursively and through embodied dance. I argue that their performance, while phenomenologically empowering for them, must contend with broader heteronormative ideologies embedded within Mexican social norms. Chapter 3 examines a genre of spectacular eating show, *mukbang*, in which broadcasters document themselves consuming copious amounts of food, sometimes interacting live with fans. I focus on the multimodal, multisensorial ways that mukbang performers stage an eating event for their viewers. Through a semiotic analysis of the performance of a famous Korean mukbanger, Bazz, I argue that Bazz creates a constrained sociality between himself and his viewers. More specifically, Bazz takes on the role of a caregiver by describing and manipulating

food textures, expressing pleasure, and demonstrating expertise with regards to proper ways of eating. In Chapter 4, I examine the ways that Korean American beauty entrepreneurs emphasize nostalgia, memory, and sensorial experience in the construction of their own expertise in order to sell K-beauty (i.e. *Korean beauty*) products to an American market.

My analysis reveals that race, gender, and national identity are reconfigured in unexpected ways in these affect-laden performances as part of the creation of a vicarious experience of bodily pleasure for viewers. An examination of the cosignification of language and embodiment underscores the multimodal, and – as I argue – multisensorial ways that performers craft an experience of mediated care for the viewer. For instance, male K-pop dancers in Mexico perform feminized Korean ‘cuteness’ through linguistic pronouncements of love and affective gestures, challenging hegemonic notions of masculinity while contributing to a local K-pop subculture. Korean American K-beauty entrepreneurs position themselves as cultural experts by discursively linking an imagined nostalgic Korean past to recent trends in skincare. Online eating stars engage in complex multimodal work to create a pleasurable visual and sonic experience for their viewers. These online actors perform technologically mediated care work by evoking smell, taste, and texture for viewers through language and embodied displays. Language takes on sensory qualities through all these performers’ affective work, which is often performed in racialized and gendered forms, promoting online circulation as well as offline affective resonance with the viewer/consumer. Such performances highlight the roles of language, materiality, and embodied action in crafting mediated care and sociality online.

As the body is central to all of these genres, my work examines the ways that sensoriality is bodily experienced and produced, questions of materiality, including the

material dimensions of language, and the role of affect in mediatized performance as well as in creating a sense of sociality with the viewer. Analytically, my focus on the body has involved taking a semiotic approach to the study of online performances which attends to embodiment, affect, and discourse. All three genres of Korean popular culture that I investigated are embodied, and this study seeks to explain the role of affective performance in creating relationality between the broadcaster and viewer, and how the lines between producer and consumer may become blurred interactionally in such performances.

My analytic focus on the body is a continuation of my scholarly interest in mediatized embodiment (Garza 2021), but this work has also forced me to reckon with the question of what counts as linguistics, a point I discuss in greater detail in the final chapter. My interest in particular genres and particular kinds of social actors, especially around youth culture, has shifted more to processes and encounters in the course of this project. In the sections that follow, I first give a brief overview of my methods and positionality. Next, the great majority of this chapter is dedicated to a review of the three major bodies of literature that my work engages: scholarship on language and materiality (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012); language and the body, or embodied sociolinguistics (Bucholtz and Hall 2016); and qualia (Chumley and Harkness 2013). I conclude the chapter with brief remarks on my work's contributions to linguistics, followed by a preliminary discussion of multisensorial semiotics in virtual spaces as a way of calling attention to language as one component of a much more complex semiotic system that involves multiple senses and modalities.

### *Methods*

As sociocultural linguists have effectively demonstrated, the stylistic meaning of a linguistic variant cannot be determined in isolation; thus, the analysis of semiotic forms must be



situated within a wider system of social meaning (Eckert 2008; Bucholtz 2015; Silverstein 1976). In this work, I take an ethnographic approach, which has allowed me to contextualize online practices within the broader semiotic landscape of popular cultural circulation. The three genres of Korean popular culture that I investigated – often referred to as *new media* given their mediation through the Internet – have seen an explosion of scholarly engagement in the past five years. Hence, numerous top-down theories or descriptions of each of these genres have been published, but my analytic interest was explicitly in taking an emic perspective to understand the social meaning that is generated by such online performances. I also wanted to discern how participants in these genres understand their own practice, while attending to the conflicting, sometimes incommensurable ways that their participation clashes with broader ideologies of appropriate personhood. To that end, I consulted Korean sources whenever possible and aimed to “follow the data” by locating original source material as much as possible. For instance, when numerous Korean sources referred to similar mukbang performances, I located the cited programs or clips online and made note of similarities and differences across contexts.

This project was originally intended to be a multi-sited ethnography which examined the global circulation of genres. It became a combined online (Androutsopoulos 2008; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus 2012; Hine 2008) and traditional ethnographic research due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The move to online research proved to be less challenging than I envisioned precisely because of my early interest in online practices and my longstanding interest in Internet data. As part of my online ethnography, to better understand YouTube’s affordances as a social media platform, in March 2020, I started a YouTube channel called *The Ways in Which*, for which I researched, scripted, and recorded

video content related to my experiences in graduate school and my research interests. I also promoted my channel on other social media sites including Twitter and Instagram. This limited but elucidating experience taught me about the behind-the-scenes complexity of creating a YouTube video from start to finish as well as the ubiquity of cross-platform engagement. Ultimately, for this project, there was very little difference between online and offline ethnography. My media analysis was supplemented with ethnographic triangulation through sources that provided a historical and contemporary account of the phenomena I was trying to contextualize. For instance, in my analysis of K-beauty performances, I considered the broader sociohistorical context of consumerism broadly in South Korea and aimed to track the reception of K-beauty in the US in order to understand the discursively constructed intermediary position that Korean American entrepreneurs seek to fill.

I have adapted existing analytic tools to fit the needs of my data and various research sites. I employ multimodal discourse-analytic methods, blending conventions from UC Santa Barbara's Discourse Transcription (Du Bois 2015) with conventions in Norris (2004) and Hoenes del Pinal (2011), which highlight the complementary roles of language and embodied action in creating broader social meaning.

Each analytic chapter could easily have been expanded into multiple chapters. During the process of researching and writing, many more questions were generated that I chose not to pursue due to time constraints. Hence, a well-founded critique, in my view, is that parts of the analysis may feel "thin" from a traditional anthropological lens. What I might offer in response is a contextualization of my own positionality vis-à-vis the genres I studied.

#### *Researcher positionality and ethics*

I was an outsider to both K-pop dance in Mexico and K-pop fandom broadly, but was most

physically immersed in this research site insofar as face-to-face interaction is concerned. My encounter with mukbang, meanwhile, was first as a consumer of mukbang videos since 2017, but my understanding of its emergence as a popular genre is largely informed by scholarly and popular articles, not by a firsthand experience of living in South Korea during the genre's emergence. My research was likewise informed by my K-beauty experiences as a consumer with wide-ranging involvement in K-beauty practices as well as by my socioculturally specific, lived experiences of gendered socialization as it pertains to ideals of racialized feminine beauty.

Each of my chapters, then, required a different orientation to my participants and to “the community,” itself a fraught and unstable term for all three chapters. Especially in contexts where ethical concerns seem so obvious and even uncontentious, I wanted to remain mindful to treat and represent participants (or perhaps the objects of my analysis, in the case of mukbang broadcasters) as mutable throughout the research process. I also struggled with not wanting to divulge personal details of my participants to an academic audience throughout this project. In other words, researcher-participant is not the only set of relations I encountered in this study – as is typical in much ethnographic research – and I grappled with shifting loyalties throughout the research process in ways that may not be apparent in the individual chapters.

My positionality as a researcher working in multiple contexts also yielded unique affordances. In addition, as a politically active Korean American researcher fluent in Spanish, Korean, and English, my approach to this research has been informed by a desire to understand intersectional race and gender dynamics, particularly from a transnational lens, while also being wary of the limitations of prioritizing a US-based frame for understanding

gender and especially race.

### *Language and materiality*

This section is dedicated to the primary bodies of literature that my work engages: language and materiality, language and the body, and qualia. Despite the mutually constitutive relationship of language and embodiment in creating social meaning, traditional sociolinguistic research has tended to treat the body as secondary to language even as it relies on social categories that are experienced corporeally. Moreover, as new forms of sociality flourish online, linguistics continues to privilege face-to-face spoken language, underscoring semiotic ideologies that reify dualistic approaches to the study of language. Such ideologies have the potential to reproduce hegemonic norms of ‘appropriate’ bodily comportment, including the marginalization of nonnormative (e.g., racialized, non-binary, disabled) body morphologies and embodied ways of experiencing the world.

Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) argue for the productive potential of considering the material with the linguistic in the same analytic frame in an emerging field of scholarship they call *language materiality*. They highlight the work of linguistic anthropologists and scholars in allied fields whose work bridges such gaps, identifying four areas of research that encompass such scholarly efforts. The first area captures how linguistic forms and objects, including material culture, may co-signify meaning and value. The second area covers practices of embodiment, aesthetics, and style. The third area of study is dedicated to how linguistic forms circulate and become objectified and the final area covers language commodification in the context of global capitalism.

My work encompasses all four areas of language materiality and especially the first two areas enumerated above. My interest in embodied style in mediatized performance as it

interacts with language (Garza 2021) re-emerges in Chapter 2, for example, in my semiotic analysis of Mexican K-pop dancers' social media engagement. Dancers' embodied citations in the form of outfits that mimic those of their favorite K-pop stars on social media are heightened by their use Korean script, allowing them to perform a specialized K-pop fandom. Shankar and Cavanaugh's capacious term *language materiality* captures how the linguistic and the material may interact to create meaning and value, underscoring the material dimensions of language itself as well as the linguistic dimensions of materiality.

### *Embodied sociolinguistics*

Following Shankar and Cavanaugh, in this dissertation I treat language and the body as mutually constitutive in creating social meaning, engaging Bucholtz and Hall's (2016) call for linguists to take the body seriously. The authors argue that an extended discussion of the theoretical relationship between language and embodiment is largely lacking in sociocultural linguistics. Their call for linguists to pay greater explicit attention to the body and embodiment is a much-needed interdisciplinary intervention that necessarily involves a diversity of methods and analytical foci. More provocatively, Bucholtz and Hall call attention to the stakes of centering the body in studies of language, including problematizing the primacy of human language and even the human body. In their review, the authors examine five main analytic areas of an embodied sociolinguistics:

1. The voice
2. Bodily semiotics of style and self-presentation
3. Discourses and counterdiscourses of the body
4. Embodied motion, action, and experience
5. The mediation of embodiment by material objects and technologies

My work largely engages the latter four areas, frequently attending to their simultaneity and overlap. For example, mukbang star Bazz overtly comments on a piece of kimchi during his broadcast, and upon noticing it he produces a fricative voice gesture that is widely used in Korean (Harkness 2011) to index surprise or the state of being impressed, metapragmatically drawing his interlocutors' attention to the food item. This voice gesture is accompanied by the embodied action of bringing the piece of kimchi close to the camera for his viewers to see. Bazz does all this with the help of multiple screens and a camera, technological mediations which allow him to manipulate and monitor various perspectives for a pleasurable experience for his viewers. Thus, in my work, embodied action functions multimodally with discourse, objects (e.g. food items), and technological mediation.

As Bucholtz and Hall note, from a semiotic perspective, the body stands on equal analytic footing to language, an insight which has been especially crucial to how I approach my data. Their reminder draws attention to the ways that an isolated focus on linguistic form is often arbitrary, more a reflection of disciplinary training than an indication of how meaningful co-signification between language and the body actually occurs. As Bucholtz and Hall write, “embodied variables give semiotic meaning to linguistic variables rather than the reverse” (180). This point calls into question the forms that we as linguists are trained to notice and our lack of training in semiotic analysis more broadly, an issue I take on in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Poststructuralist insights on the discursive construction of the body (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1978) have seen a robust uptake in sociocultural linguistics, especially in the field of language, gender, and sexuality (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Zimman 2014, 2017). Such scholarship underscores the intersubjective processes involved in identity formation.

Relatedly, work on language and the body has sustained productive conversations on habitus formation, the set of socialized and socially distinguishing dispositions that shape bodily praxis (Bourdieu 1978). While Bourdieu's theorization of habitus has been the subject of critique for overdetermining embodied formations (Archer 2010; Gerrans 2005), many scholars have expanded on Bourdieu's theory, showing that habitus formation can be an agentic process (Mahmood 2005; Farnell 2000). Indeed, my work shows that habitus can result from gendered socialization in the case of K-beauty, which can be passed down to the consumer, or from the innovation of embodied habitus through agentic involvement in K-pop cover dance. In fact, K-pop dancers describe their involvement in K-pop dance as an approximation of embodied femininity.

*Sociocultural linguistic methods of studying language and the body*

Bucholtz and Hall offer a robust review of methods of an embodied sociocultural linguistics. As they highlight, in recent years, conversation analysis has been at forefront of investigating the use of the body in interaction. In my earliest experimentation with multimodal transcription, I frequently found myself consulting literature outside of discourse analysis in order to more precisely transcribe the moment-to-moment sequential progression and social coordination of embodied action (Goodwin 1981, 2000; Mondada 2009, 2016; Norris 2004). I have thus been able to adopt many of the conventions used by conversation analysts to represent the body-in-action, especially those by Norris (2004) and Hoenes-Pinal (2011) and combining it with my own training in UCSB's Discourse Transcription (Du Bois 2015). Crucially, multimodal transcription conventions must be flexible based on analytic foci. In the transcriptions used across the three chapters, at times, discourse is given more prominence while at other times, embodied action is given greater focus.

Scholarship in anthropology has underscored the ways in which the social meaning of bodily practices is contingent on situated cultural and historical factors. Sociocultural linguistics has long since embraced the emic perspective afforded by ethnographic methods. Much sociocultural linguistic research on style and bodily presentation of self is often ethnographic in its approach (Bucholtz 2011b; Eckert 1989; Jaffe 2009; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Nakassis 2016), for it is only through a deep understanding of local semiotics that the sociocultural meaning of embodiment can be recognized.

There are also few, systematic ways of doing media analysis in linguistics, let alone the analysis of embodiment alongside language in mediatised contexts. As language scholars increasingly turn to media data, linguists are rising to the challenge of developing methods that experiment with different forms of transcription which adapt to their data and incorporate media forms (Calhoun 2019; Choe 2019; Mondada 2016).

As linguists increasingly consider multimodality in linguistic contexts and data, what other kinds of noticing would be facilitated by an embrace of sensory ethnography? According to Pink (2009), sensory ethnography is not a redoing of ethnography, but rather a rethinking of ethnographic methods that attends to sensory perception and experience and the categories used to talk about sensory experiences. In this line of research, senses emerge, and cannot be known a priori, nor can we rely on a traditional typology of senses that rely on delineations of embodied sensory experience (e.g. taste, touch, smell, etc.).

#### *Attention to technology in literature*

Both Shankar and Cavanaugh as well as Bucholtz and Hall explicitly discuss the technological mediation of materiality and of bodies, drawing attention to the ways form and meaning are affected by the platform and their accompanying ideologies (see also Gershon



2011 on “media ideologies”). The emergence of new media technologies as well as the very materiality of mediated language (Agha 2011, Bucholtz 2011a) have been shown to transform everyday talk, illustrating the porousness of online and offline social lives.

Bucholtz and Hall also emphasize the insistent materiality of the body in technologically mediated forms of communication. They highlight a broader shift in the humanities and social sciences vis-à-vis the primacy given human agency. This pan-entity or trans-species approach, also considered the posthumanist turn in the humanities (Barad 2003; Haraway 1985; Latour 2005), does not do away with the human altogether but shifts analytical attention away to human-centered activity and destabilizes not only the primacy given the human, but the very basis of humanistic knowledge production. Posthumanism, as Bucholtz and Hall explain, “dissolves the discourse-materiality dichotomy by analyzing semiosis as a process that emerges in the mutually constitutive actions that take place between human bodies and the other entities with which they interact” (20). In this way, technologies and non-human objects are not static entities but become semiotically intertwined with the physical body that interacts with them. This insight on the mutual imbrication of technological intervention to bodies and discourses is one I attempt to highlight across the three chapters, although posthumanism, per se, is an engagement that is less sustained throughout.

### *The anthropology of qualia*

In their discussion of the cultural discourses surrounding the sensing body, Bucholtz and Hall cite examples which represent the complex human modalities of the senses, including Goodwin’s (1997) study on scientists’ perception of color, affective touching in families (Goodwin 2017), eating as a social activity (Wiggins 2002), and listeners’ descriptions of

speech registers attributing taste, texture, smell, sound, or shape to speech (Gal 2013). Bucholtz and Hall (2016:186) note that “the experiences that seem most fundamentally physical and biological are thoroughly social, cultural, and ideological at their core,” perfectly summarizing the interventions of the contemporary study of qualia in anthropology, which builds on a long tradition of empirical research on the conventionality of sensorial experience and the discourse registers through which such conventions of perception emerge.

The robust and ongoing theorization of qualia relies on Peircean semiotics and specifically indexical relations. Qualia are pragmatic signals, or indexes, that materialize phenomenally in human activity as sensuous qualities (Chumley and Harkness 2013; Harkness 2015, 2021). As Harkness (2021:1) writes, “qualia are not reducible to a psychology of individual perception of sensory data, to a cultural ontology of ‘materiality,’ or to philosophical intuitions about the subjective properties of consciousness.” Instead, qualia are cultural emergents which are taken-for-granted stand-ins for sensuous experiences. Qualia, then, speak to the possibilities, but also, crucially, to the limits of language, especially as it has been traditionally understood and studied in linguistics since the study of qualia necessitates attention to signs that are not immediately perceived as meaningful.

For instance, within the semiotic landscape of Latinidad among Mexican and Puerto Rican youth in Chicago, the context of Rosa’s (2019) research, embodied difference becomes emblemized to stand in for ideologized types of people. Rosa’s work vividly highlights the semiotic mediation between qualia related to hairstyles, clothing, language, food, dance, and music, and their connection to models of personhood. This link between sensorial experience and ontology that qualia mediate (Chumley 2017) is precisely what I find to be so potent (and potentiating) for my own work and political investments.

Qualia, as indexes of sensual qualities and feelings, provided a certain analytic precision to what I was witnessing in my data: namely the prominence of the senses in mukbang and K-beauty as well as phenomenological and affective experiences of participants of K-pop cover dance in Mexico City. A discussion of qualia is perhaps most sustained in Chapter 4, where K-beauty entrepreneurs describe sensorial experience embedded within memories tied to familial, cultural, and gendered meanings. Most crucially, for the purposes of my work, qualia provide a way of better understanding scalar “moves” in feeling. In other words, in Chapter 4, an attention to qualia helps to make sense of the immediate sensorial experiences (or retelling of them through memories) and their connections to a broader qualia of feeling, or affect vis-à-vis gendered beauty, culture, and even nation. Affects are invoked and embedded in the memory (that of matriarchal socialization, for instance) as well as produced by the promises of a K-beauty lifestyle: that is, ontological recognition of the yellow woman (Cheng 2019). While not explicitly a central theme in this work, qualia is a potential way of thinking through the semiotics of mediated vicariousness, work I hope to carry out in the future.

*Toward a multisensorial semiotics in the study of language*

This dissertation treats language – and discourse, in particular – as one crucial modality in a complex nexus of modalities and senses which operate simultaneously in virtual spaces. A multisensorial semiotic approach to the study of linguistic practices calls for an explicit attention to sensory experience and to modes which generate meaning alongside language, while resisting sharp delineations between embodiment, materiality, and language. While online spaces are frequently imagined as lacking physicality, a multisensorial approach problematizes online and offline bifurcations of social life.

An attention to multisensorial semiosis in online performance and other kinds of communication calls for an explicit attention to sensory experience and thus, to the co-presence and interaction of embodiment, affect, and discourse. Attending to the senses online raises new kinds of questions: How do language and embodiment foment digital forms of sociality, and what are their implications for social interaction without physicality? While online spaces are frequently imagined as lacking physical dimensions, a multisensorial semiotic approach problematizes the bifurcation of social life into online and offline while attending to the ways affective and sensual experiences unfold online as well as offline.

The concept of multisensoriality aims to capture the co-presence of various communicative modes and senses functioning simultaneously, often producing a synesthetic experience wherein numerous senses may be activated, but not all are salient. For instance, in mukbang, certain textures (e.g. fried foods) signify particularly desirable sounds in a subgenre called ASMR mukbang. Thus, even in moments of silence, texture acts as a visual signifier for particular sounds. In this way, a semiotic approach attends to the ways that language and the body as well as other forms of materiality act as cosignifiers.

Analytically, a multisensorial semiotic approach entails a diverse range of methods, including explicit attention to the movements of the body. A multisensorial semiotic linguistics requires more expansive methods and analytic tools which attend to multimodality. In many ways, linguistics is well-positioned to make lasting contributions to fields that analyze interview or media data, given the continued sharpening of discourse transcription and multimodal transcription methods in related fields of discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguists have robustly taken up ethnographic methods to prioritize emically generated categories and understandings of language. Part of the work of this dissertation is considering sensory ethnography in the study of language and materiality and its implications not only for the objects of study, but for the researcher and the field writ large. Sensory ethnography attends to how the senses are activated during the research process as well as how sensorial experience and perception emerge in interaction, rather than being known a priori. Greater analytic attention to sensoriality in linguistics research has the potential to generate structural shifts in linguistics by destabilizing the primacy of object-ifying knowledge and prioritizing particular kinds of epistemological traditions, including what has conventionally been deemed a worthy object of inquiry in linguistics.

*Contributions of my work*

My work's attention to the mutually constitutive relationship of language and embodiment in creating social meaning has implications for how language and the body are studied together. My research on digital media argues that virtually mediated performance is no less embodied. My analytic focus is not always the physical body or overt language; for instance, online sociality is imagined as a place that lacks physical touch. Language and materiality in my data converge through sounds or voice qualities which combine affect, food manipulation, and technological mediation. Can such an analysis be considered linguistics, per se? The dissertation argues these instances are no less full of semiotic potential.

By insisting on the interconnectedness of mediatized language and embodied performance in digital media – and its simultaneously raced and gendered dimensions – my project contributes to multiple fields, including sociolinguistics, anthropology, transnational race and gender studies, critical Korean studies, and media studies. It also contributes to

ongoing discussions of multimodal methods in discourse analysis and conversation analysis. This work actively engages multiple already-vibrant fields in anthropology including linguistic and semiotic anthropology, sensory ethnography, and the growing field of language and racialization from a semiotic perspective (Alim, Reyes, and Kroskrity 2020; Chun and Lo 2015; Rosa and Flores 2017; Smalls 2019). Furthermore, my attention to transnational race and gender in my chapters (especially Chapter 2 and 4) speaks to the so-called transnational turn in Asian American studies and problematizes physical locales as historically privileged sites of place-making or community-building for diasporic communities. Finally, my examination of race and gender in digital media contributes to the small but growing literature on the Internet's role in re-asserting the importance of race and gender online rather than as a space of disembodiment and postracial colorblindness (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Nakamura 2007).

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## Chapter 2

### Approximations of the feminine: Citations of gender and race in Mexican K-pop counterpublics

#### *The only Korean in sight*

It's late morning in Mexico City. One of those typical chilango Saturdays that are wonderfully, almost eerily calm. The air is balmy with a pleasant hint of humidity so I skip the metro. I start to walk the entire length of Reforma, the long boulevard that splits the city in half. Despite living here for two months, I'm still not accustomed to seeing the city so sparsely populated on weekends, an absence heightened by the expansive width of the famous boulevard. I carefully cross the street, leaving behind tree-lined cobbled sidewalks, and catch a glimpse of the *pabellón coreano*, a replicated pagoda which South Korea gifted to Mexico in 1968. As I enter the financial district, the skyscrapers that greet me are overwhelming. Arriving at a *glorieta*, an enormous roundabout of organized chaos, I stop to check the map on my phone. I'm almost there. My pulse quickens. Leaving Reforma to turn onto a smaller street, I see clusters of three, four, five animated youth. As I get closer to my destination, the clusters become a crowd, and I witness an incredible bricolage of cloth face masks, glitter, platform sneakers, eyeliner, plaid, more face masks. I suddenly feel unsure and underdressed. My feet approach the steps of the venue and gradually, the bass of an ongoing performance becomes palpable. Faces look up from pamphlets and recently purchased paraphernalia. I awkwardly make eye contact with too many strangers who frantically tap their friends on the shoulder without looking away. Glances turn into fixed stares. I think some jaws even drop in utter disbelief. I enter the venue in haste, succumbing to the weight of prolonged gazes and scattered giggles. I hurriedly purchase a wristband that

allows me to enter Expo Reforma, one of Mexico City's premiere convention centers. While I scope around, nervously scanning the numerous booths of Korean street food and merchandise vendors, the music blaring, all of my senses are activated. Once again, I find myself staring back at the dense mass of attendees of KShow, the largest K-pop convention in Mexico, and my heart sinks as I grasp the reason for the crowd's reactions. I am the only Korean in sight.

This vignette highlights the mismatch between my own expectations and what I encountered at a K-pop event in Mexico City during my fieldwork. Despite the marked absence of Korean people at the event, recognizable Korean sponsoring brands such as Kia and LG were hypervisible. The presence of the Korean Wave, or hallyu, is a relatively new phenomenon in Latin America (Choi, Meza, and Park 2014). The popularity of K-pop in particular is attested in record ticket sales (Han 2017) and a growing number of Spanish-language K-pop songs and collaborations. Some of the most famous K-pop acts now make mandatory stops at major cities across Latin America as part of their world tours (Trivedi 2013). Despite this observable rise in consumption and global visibility in many Latin American countries, K-pop and other genres of Korean popular culture are not quite mainstream at the local level. Indeed, fans are sometimes characterized as eccentric and strange, and K-pop has even been ideologically positioned as a genre that incites youth in Latin America to mass insurrection (Aton 2019; Min 2017). While scholars have been mapping the spread of hallyu in Latin America (Kim 2012; Min, Jin, and Han 2019), less attention has been paid to how consumers of K-pop understand their own praxis as this global phenomenon takes on localized meaning. Greater attention to the complexities of such local engagements can elucidate how everyday young people position themselves vis-à-vis

both the flows of global capital and locally dominant ideologies of appropriate personhood. Furthermore, studying how young people engage with hallyu may shed light on the ways they negotiate their liminality at the juncture of cultural contact.

Informed by multimodal ethnographic research I conducted among Korean and Mexican youth in Mexico City from 2016 to 2019, this chapter takes a closer look at the practices of young consumer-fans of K-pop (i.e. *k-poppers*) in the Mexican context. I begin with a discussion of K-pop and the cover dance genre, and then focus on a subset of the K-pop fandom in Mexico: youth who engage in the genre of the cover dance, a rendition of the original choreography of K-pop music videos. I analyze how one all-male, Mexican cover dance group, Guys' Generation recreates the performance of a well-known K-pop girl group, Girls' Generation, which they achieve through discourse and embodied performance on social media.

I consider such discursive and embodied practices to constitute a form of citation: a discursive act that brings together two or more discourses and whose meaning relies on the recognition of sameness and differences (Derrida 1988; Nakassis 2013). A citation is able to reanimate other discourses, and as a semiotic process, citationality captures the self-reflectiveness of the act of citation (Nakassis 2013). I examine youth's citational practices in social media as well as in the cover dance genre. By citing their favorite K-pop stars through discursive and embodied practice, I argue that K-pop fans help shape a local distinguishable community.

My examination of fans' metapragmatic discourse surrounding the cover dance shows that K-pop in Mexico exemplifies an emergent localized counterpublic with shared discursive practices (Warner 2002) within broader transnational youth culture. Moreover,

their embodied citations through dance allow some K-pop dancers to contest heteronormativity in their local context. I argue that such local citations and especially their gendered inflections allow these and other K-pop dancers in Mexico to perform a queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006), problematizing heteronormativity in their local context as well as other dominant forms of appropriate personhood. These performances, then, are indeed performative: K-pop becomes a way that youth engage in queer worldmaking by creating new possibilities through citation. However, far from exemplifying unmitigated agency, dancers' performances and their uptake from viewers point to the constant frictions between their community of practice and dominant frames of interpretation. This study elucidates how the influence of a global, ostensibly hegemonic project like K-pop is far from unidirectional and that the genre can be reinterpreted by youth for locally agentive purposes.

#### *Ethnographic context and methods*

In the summer of 2016, I began to notice visible markers of hallyu in the Zona Rosa neighborhood of Mexico City where my ethnographic fieldwork was based. These included the emergence of K-beauty stores, K-pop events hosted by multinational corporations, and photography exhibitions dedicated to well-known K-pop bands. The dramatic rise of hallyu and especially K-pop globally since 2008 had already reached Mexico by the time my fieldwork was under way and showed no signs of waning. Much of the data analyzed in this chapter is based on face-to-face and online ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with Mexican K-pop dancers and fans between 2016 and 2019.

In an initial pilot survey, I contacted 13 dance groups from Mexico City and Guadalajara, the cities with the greatest concentration of cover dance groups in Mexico, locating them through Youtube, Facebook, and KpopDance, a website dedicated to K-pop in



Mexico. I created two sets of questionnaires, the first set seeking ethnographic information and more general questions about K-pop cover dance groups in Mexico and a follow-up set of questions which focused on ideologies and attitudes about Korean culture as well as their participation in K-pop, focusing on issues of performance. A total of 21 dancers participated in the questionnaires: all of the participants were Mexicans with the exception of one individual who self-identified as Korean. Given the regular circulation of new videos on YouTube, an online ethnographic approach (Androutsopoulos 2008; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus 2012; Hine 2015) is crucial to understanding the circulation and uptake of this genre. My online participant-observation began in 2016 when I started to follow Mexican K-pop cover dance accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

In the summers of 2016 and 2018, I also attended major K-pop conventions in Mexico City and conducted a group interview with two members of Guys' Generation, Toño and Memo, central figures in the present study. I also conducted one-on-one and group interviews with twelve self-identified K-pop fans at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City. While the young participants of my study tended to be from working class backgrounds, I do not believe this to be a representative sample of K-pop fans in Mexico more broadly, given the often exorbitant prices for admissions to K-pop events and concerts.

A major focal point of this study, the Mexican K-pop cover dance group Guys' Generation, is an explicit homage to the K-pop girl band, Girls' Generation, one of the most successful bands of the genre. The founders of Guys' Generation originally recruited nine members to match the original nine of Girls' Generation (one member Jessica left the group in 2014, five years after their debut). Guys' Generation was formed in 2010, and membership has fluctuated between two and nine members. Guys' Generation began recruiting female

members in 2018 and are still active as a cover dance group.

In my initial recruitment email to all dancers, I introduced myself as a US-born Korean researcher who was fluent in Spanish, Korean, and English. As I was not a participant in K-pop dance or in the online communities whose practices I studied, an ethnographic perspective allowed me to focus on elements that dancers find most salient or significant to their practice as well as to contextualize such practices within the context of local K-pop fandom and norms of the broader Mexican public.

### *K-pop and hallyu in Latin America*

K-pop, which stands for Korean pop music, has become a global phenomenon and is widely considered to be the most visible component of hallyu, the so-called Korean Wave. The Korean Wave, which refers to the visibility of South Korean cultural production around the globe, was initially promoted as an official Korean government policy to revive the country's economy after the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s (Kuwahara 2014; Walsh 2014).

Scholars of Korean popular culture argue that hallyu exercises a soft power that works to ideologically set South Korea apart from other Asian economies by projecting an image of exceptionally advanced modernity (Shin 2000). Furthermore, this soft power has been argued to further national interests globally by encouraging foreign investment in sectors outside the realm of popular culture.

Given the direct involvement of the South Korean government in matters of popular culture, exported Korean products have been designed to appeal to the widest possible global audience, extending well beyond geopolitical boundaries. The rapid rise of digital media has also been credited with contributing to the global reach of K-pop and other Korean products (Jin 2016; Kuwahara 2014; Song 2019). Since around 2007, the South Korean government

has become more directly invested in the management and exportation of popular cultural products. This newer, more aggressive version of the Korean Wave, dubbed Hallyu 2.0, is characterized by greater governmental intervention, increased access and consumerism through user-based media, and greater visibility of Korean cultural products in areas where they were previously undetected, namely in Latin America (Jin 2016; Lee and Nornes 2015). Mexico, in particular, has been said to “play a key role to impulse the Korean wave in the rest of the American continent” (Choi, Meza, and Park 2014: 2). The popularity of K-pop in Mexico is attested in the increased surge of fan clubs surrounding various K-pop groups. For instance, in 2004, there were only four fan clubs in Mexico with about 2,000 fans, but as of 2011, there were 70 clubs with more than 30,000 fans, confirming the increased magnitude of the Korean Wave in Mexico (Choi et al. 2014).

K-pop is a musical genre which borrows from various globalized genres, including hip hop (Garza 2021; Kim 2018), Euro-pop, R&B (Anderson 2020), dance music, dubstep, and more. Part of K-pop’s recent mass appeal is due to the wide range of music it encompasses as well as the Korean entertainment industry’s marketing strategies in response to ever-shifting patterns of global consumerism (Kim 2013). The role of Korean entertainment conglomerates such as YG Entertainment, S.M. Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment cannot be overstated due to their monopoly of the South Korean music industry (Oh 2014). In fact, many prominent CEOs are themselves former K-pop stars with firsthand experience as performers. Given their knowledge surrounding the internal workings of the music industry, these agencies have mastered the analysis and commodification of global trends.

K-pop performances – both live and via video production – are meticulously orchestrated by recording companies, and musical singles and videos are frequently released

on multiple platforms simultaneously. K-pop is perhaps best known for its group acts, known as “idol” groups. Members often train for years, sometimes starting as children or young teens, their training managed by the music labels. K-pop videos usually feature impressive visual elements, including intricate dance choreography, dazzling visual effects, and elaborate styling of clothing and accessories. Furthermore, since the popularity of K-pop has grown alongside the advent of YouTube as the premiere global video-sharing platform, the visual content of K-pop is inextricably tied to its massive popularity. Indeed, K-pop is largely understood and consumed as a multimedia performance that emphasizes the visual as much as – if not more than – the aural (Kim 2018). The audio-visual format of K-pop necessitates an analytic attention to the body and its semiotic production in performance contexts alongside examination of lyrics and music.

The global proliferation of K-pop cover dance groups attests to the prominence of dance in K-pop. The K-pop cover dance is a genre of dance choreography in which fans of K-pop form their own groups and recreate the dance choreographies of well-known K-pop bands. Some groups’ choreographies digress very little from the original composition while other groups choose to change it altogether, adding their own stylistic elements. Dancers often compete in local and international competitions against other groups. Cover dance groups tend to craft their own group personality or style, as reflected by the kinds of songs or K-pop groups they choose to cover. Group membership typically ranges from four to twelve dancers and is not necessarily analogous to the groups they cover; moreover, groups often hold regular auditions to recruit new members. Dancers are generally young: in the survey of Mexican cover groups that I conducted in 2016, all 21 dancers were young adults, ranging from 18 to 26 years of age.

### *K-popers as local counterpublic*

K-pop dancers are some of the most active K-pop fans in terms of their regular consumption of and participation in global K-pop trends, but of course, not all K-pop fans are dancers. In English-speaking contexts, the term *k-popper* refers to a fan of Korean popular culture, and is frequently found in blogs, online articles, and social media. In the Mexican context, *k-poper* is the preferred orthography and is pronounced with Spanish phonology as /kei. 'po.per/. This spelling probably derives from young people's connection to online discourses where English is dominant, especially in comparison to calques with the suffix *-era/ero*, as in words like *rapera/o* (from English *rapper*) or *reggaetoneo* (one who participates in the musical genre of reggaeton). As far as I can tell from my online ethnographic observations, the orthographic representation *k-poper(s)* is most prevalent in Spanish- and Portuguese-dominant contexts. For the Mexican participants of my study, the term appears to be restricted to fans of K-pop as a musical genre and is not necessarily extended to fans of other facets of Korean popular culture, such as food, television programs, or films, as is the case with *k-poppers* in English-dominant online contexts. This difference is likely due to the fact that there is greater interest and cultural production around K-pop in Mexico – as opposed to other products associated with *hallyu* – as evidenced by the proliferation of dance events and concerts in recent years. Moreover, compared with other products linked to *hallyu*, K-pop is inarguably the most mobile commodity, as it is fueled by large, transnational stakeholders and circulates with ease on social media. Nonetheless, Mexican *k-popers* often also consume other locally available Korean cultural products, such as cuisine, television dramas (K-dramas), and increasingly, beauty products (K-beauty).

I argue that *k-popers* constitute a distinguishable community that is both ideologically

and semiotically mediated, produced through their use of distinctive discursive practices (e.g. lexicon and social media discourse) as well as through embodied performances that include but extend beyond dance. K-popers also participate in global fandom practices, participating in a K-pop public. Publics, as theorized by Warner (2002), are social entities which are not organized by a single physical locale or institution but by the circulation of discourse among strangers. Within a public, participation and relationality among strangers tends to be indirect and unspecifiable, but such discursive circulation results in binding strangers as members of a social entity. Publics tend to encompass and be reinforced by hegemonic state apparatuses such as dominant media outlets and hence, norms tend to be quite conservative.

Counterpublics, by contrast, are distinguishable communities which are generally aware of their non-dominant status vis-à-vis larger publics. The idea of a counterpublic, then, “provide[s] a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society” (Warner 2002: 81). From the perspective K-pop fans in Mexico I interviewed in Mexico City, their praxis is quite distinctive compared with other popular musical genres in the Mexican context such as salsa or more global genres like hip hop. Thus, I refer to the Mexican K-pop fandom as a counterpublic, which is constituted by individuals and communities across geographic contexts who participate discursively, mainly through social media. The Mexican K-pop counterpublic is embedded within a global K-pop public as well as a broader Mexican public.

K-pop is also increasingly publicly visible given the proliferation of K-pop events as well as live performance by K-pop dancers in public spaces such as parks or city centers. Moreover, k-popers’ Spanish-language fan forums and online discussions show that members heavily police the boundaries of their counterpublic. Cover dance groups, while a

subset of the K-pop public, are some of the most engaged members of their local K-pop counterpublics, intensively consuming and (re)creating K-pop-related content. Moreover, k-poper dance groups actively shape the discursive content of the counterpublic through their embodied habitus and online participation.

As Warner (2002: 87) notes, “A hierarchy or stigma is the assumed background of practice [for counterpublics]. One enters at one’s own risk.” When the Mexican K-pop counterpublic makes its discourse public, its members are made susceptible to outsider critique and tension with the broader Mexican public. As I discuss below, my interview data with male Mexican dancers’ demonstrate they are aware of the markedness both of their performances and of their general affiliation with K-pop. K-pop dance in Mexico and globally implicate all genders, but Mexican dancers express their performance as locally marked. Their evaluations of their own dance performance – as well as their voicing of outgroup members – sketch the contours of a heteronormative framework that is transgressed in dancers’ performances, thereby elucidating issues of legibility, social boundaries, and markedness in the k-poper counterpublic.

#### *Discursive construction of the k-poper counterpublic*

As noted above, discursive circulation is key to the construction of a counterpublic as well as of publics more broadly. My initial survey data and subsequent ethnographic fieldwork revealed a number of specialized lexical items that Mexican dancers use, including Anglicisms, borrowed Korean words, and bivalent terms (Woolard 1999) which I detail in Table 1. The list presented here is not exhaustive as new items are constantly being added to match the speed of online discourse circulation. Researchers of Japanese youth counterpublics have argued that the emergence of a specialized lexicon that is only accessible

to ingroup members is part of the process of community construction (Gagné 2008; Miller 2004; Okamoto and Smith 2004). Similarly, k-popers adopt and create their own lexical items using English, Korean, and Spanish. As I did not explicitly ask about ingroup lexical items, counterpublic members' use of them in written and spoken discourse with little meta-description presents them as presupposed categories. My email exchanges with k-popers reveal the following list of items that participants freely used with me. However, the actual number of ingroup lexical items is far higher, as can be seen in crowd-sourced community forums.

Table 1. Sample lexicon of k-popers, based on 2016 survey data

Anglicisms	<i>k-poper</i> 'a fan of Korean pop culture' <i>girlband</i> 'K-pop band comprised of women' <i>boyband</i> 'K-pop band comprised of men' <i>cover</i> 'imitation of K-pop dance choreography' <i>pose</i> 'pose, as for a picture' <i>fan</i> 'admirer or consumer of K-pop'
Korean terms	<i>hangul</i> 'Korean language' <i>aegyo</i> 'cuteness' <i>selca</i> 'selfie' <i>oppa</i> 'older brother'
Bivalent terms	<i>el idol</i> 'popstar' <i>dorama</i> 'Korean soap opera'

Here, I focus on the Korean and bivalent lexical items that appear in my written survey data although participants used many of these items in spoken discourse. Since the dancers I surveyed knew I was fluent in Korean and English and all survey questions were in Spanish, the lack of linguistic accommodation or explanation of these terms is not surprising.

Nonetheless, the appearance of romanized Korean (e.g. *hangul*, *aegyo*, and *selca*) indexes at least some knowledge of the Korean language and may also function as a certain accommodation to (the participants' perceptions of) my own Korean linguistic and cultural



positionality or their own approximation to Korean culture. For instance, the Korean word *selca* ‘selfie’ is a linguistic blend of two English words, self and camera. Given that the English loanword *selfie* is more commonly used in Mexico, k-poppers’ use of *selca* is marked, indexing their knowledge of Korean lexical items, but more significantly, their participation in broader online communities where Korean terms are widely circulated.

Participants also used the term *idol* in written and spoken language, which I classify as bivalent between English and Korean because of their use of it to refer to K-pop stars specifically. The Korean word 아이돌 a-i-dol is a loanword from English and refers to K-pop stars in the Korean context, unlike the American referent, where a term like *pop star* is more common (with the notable exception of the reality television show *American Idol*). Another bivalent term was *dorama* ‘drama’, referring to Korean television series. Given the existence of the Spanish cognate *drama* as well as the term *telenovela*, referring to a similar genre, the use of *dorama* in my written and spoken data is especially salient. This orthographic representation with an epenthetic vowel likely comes from the pronunciation of the Korean word for television shows, deu-ra-ma 드라마 /'durama/, itself an English calque. The high back vowel /u/ is prevalent in Japanese and Korean, but not attested in Mexican Spanish, which may explain why the more familiar vowel /o/ would take its place. Kpopers’ use of this loanword indexes their exposure to Korean phonology – however superficially – as well as their participation in realms of Korean popular culture beyond K-pop. Further, a second-order indexical meaning is created by the use of this term: that of mutual understanding and membership within the K-pop counterpublic’s broader discursive practices.

In the following email exchange, two of the founding members of Guys’ Generation

describe the relationship between their interest in K-pop and the Korean language.

Transcript 1

1 JOY: ¿Hablas coreano, o alguno de los miembros del grupo? ¿Las letras de las  
2 canciones te ayudan a aprender el coreano o te atraen a querer aprender coreano?  
*Do you or any other members speak Korean? Do song lyrics help you learn Korean  
or make you want to learn Korean?*

3 TOÑO: Y sí, las letras ayudan mucho a recordar palabras y conceptos. Gracias al  
4 K-Pop es que comencé a interesarme en el hangul.  
*And yes, the lyrics help a lot to remember words and concepts. It's thanks to K-pop  
that I started to get interested in hangul (the Korean language).*

5 MEMO: En cuanto a las canciones ayudan mucho en el sentido que mantiene algunas  
6 palabras y sus significados frescos en tu mente. En lo personal me gusta cuando  
7 conforme voy aprendiendo puedo entender más los títulos de las canciones o lo que  
8 quieren decir.  
*In terms of the songs, [Korean lyrics] help a lot in the sense that they keep certain  
words and meanings fresh in your mind. Personally I like it when the more I learn  
[Korean] I can understand more of the titles of the songs or what they mean.*

Both dancers describe how K-pop lyrics help them learn and retain Korean words and concepts ('ayudan mucho a recordar', line 5; 'mantiene...frescos en tu mente', lines 7-8). Toño explains that his consumption of and participation in K-pop allows for consistent exposure to the Korean language; for him, K-pop acts as a gateway to learning Korean, or *hangul* (line 6). The word choice here is telling: the use of romanized Korean indexes an insider positionality, or perhaps an orientation to myself as ethnically Korean. Toño's lexical

choice also does not pick up the term *coreano* offered in my question. For his part, Memo asserts that K-pop lyrics help improve his Korean, and that the converse is also true: learning Korean helps improve his understanding of songs. Korean and K-pop thereby take on a symbiotic relationship. While Toño and Memo credit K-pop lyrics with helping them learn Korean, many of the lexical items they used (e.g. *hangul*, *aegyo*) in everyday conversation are not words usually featured in K-pop songs. Such lexical choices, then, index broader active participation in the K-pop public and even non-K-pop counterpublics. Memo, for instance, had been taking Korean language classes for two years at the Korean Cultural Center in Mexico City, exemplifying a certain investment in learning Korean beyond – or perhaps linked to – his participation in K-pop.

Indeed, members of Mexican K-pop cover dance groups use Korean strategically across social media platforms to create additional indexical links to their beloved K-pop bands and in discursive engagement with and within broader K-pop publics. The strategic use of Korean positions k-popers as experts within their counterpublic.



Figure 1. Instagram post of Guys' Generation celebrating Girls' Generations' ten-year anniversary

In this Instagram post from 2017, the then-current members of Guys' Generation are featured with the name of their group in English and Korean 소년시대 *so-nyeon-si-dae* (Figure 1).

The sizeable Korean text overshadows the English and intertextually creates direct indexical links to Girls' Generation, whose Korean name is *so-nyeo-si-dae*. *So-nyeon* (as used by Guys' Generation) means 'young boy'; its binary counterpart is *so-nyeo* 'young girl'. *Si-dae* means 'generation'. The replacement of *so-nyeo* with *so-nyeon* creates visual and sonic resonance with Girls' Generation. Here, the group celebrates Girls' Generation's ten-year anniversary, not their own. The members are wearing coordinated attires with the green and white outfits on the left and white outfits on right. Such symmetry of bodily arrangement and staged poses simulate promotional material or an album cover. Their sartorial display finds its inspiration in the video for Girls' Generation's 2007 debut song "Into the New World" (*da-si man-nan se-gye*), outfits which Girl's Generation subsequently recreated in numerous live performances (SMTOWN 2011) (See Figures 2 and 3). While the colors are the same combination of green and white, Guys' Generation's version features plain T-shirts, hoodies, and long pants, and lack accessories. Girls' Generation's outfits reflect a feminine, sporty style, similar to a prototypical cheerleader outfit, as reflected by the short skirts, single knee pads, and rugby socks. Guys' Generation's overall embodied citation shared the same color palette as Girls' Generation, but is gendered masculine.



Figure 2 and 3. Girls' Generation's outfits from "Into the New World" video and live performance

Guy's Generation's replication of these ensembles cites a momentous event of the past –the debut of Girls' Generation – but doing so creates new meaning in the present. In Bakhtinian terms, these visual citations conjure nostalgic chronotopes of Girls' Generation's early days as a group and simultaneously allows Guys' Generation to authenticate their fandom as having stood the test of time. In other words, Guys' Generation celebrates Girls' Generation's debut of 2007 while also celebrating their fandom in 2017. The Instagram post as a whole acts as a citational homage that invokes the past in the present moment of citation, attesting to Guys' Generation's present discursive engagement with a K-pop public.

Simultaneously, the post acts as a conjuring of the future through Internet virality made possible by way of hashtags. Guys' Generation creates two separate captions for their post (Figure 4), which each have slightly different functions: the first caption celebrates Guys' Generation while the second promotes Girls' Generation's upcoming album. In the first caption, the cover group does not use hashtags using their name (i.e. #GuysGeneration), an otherwise common practice in their social media posts. Their creation of a separate caption to display promotional hashtags related to Girls' Generation subscribes to broader K-pop fan practices – by not only using hashtags in Korean used by global fans – but by prioritizing the wellbeing of K-pop stars (Choi 2020). In other words, in such a momentous event as a ten-year anniversary, while Guys' Generation promotes themselves, they do so separately, in the form of the first caption. Instead, their post includes a second caption which encompasses all hashtags associated with Girls' Generation's ten-year anniversary, including

Korean hashtags (#소녀시대 10주년 #다시만난세계) used by global fans across social media platforms.



Figure 4. Guys' Generation's use of two captions.

Given that Guys' Generation is not, in fact, celebrating their own anniversary, this appropriation of Girls' Generation's "celebration" as their own to create indexical links between two seemingly disparate realms is an instance of what Susan Gal (2019) has termed *grafting*. The first caption, "Guys' Generation 10Y Celebration," creates direct indexical links to K-pop history while authenticating their local fandom by demonstrating knowledge of such history. Put differently, Guy's Generation is able to graft new meaning onto local fan practices by 'borrowing' from a global genre. Furthermore, the use of Korean hashtags throughout attests to broader language norms of the K-pop public with which Guys' Generation regularly engages. Korean hashtags allow for greater reach among global fans, connecting Guys' Generation's own praxis to a multilingual K-pop public by minimizing intertextual gaps (Briggs and Bauman 1992) between local and global discursive practices.

In sum, Guys' Generation's Instagram post and social media practices more broadly create interdiscursive links (Silverstein 2005) to K-pop stars and other global fans of the K-

pop public. The Instagram post analyzed here semiotically invokes nostalgic chronotopes of K-pop history while gesturing to the future through continued Internet circulation made possible by hashtags. Guys' Generation's embodied similarities act as an homage to Girls' Generation's past while their discursive practices on social media prove them to be active members of the K-pop public. Their citational practices verify that they are performing fandom well within the K-pop public by proliferating global hashtags. Guys' Generation's post and social media practices more broadly harness the power that it cites: the global visibility of Girls' Generation. Mexican k-popers' discursive moves establish links to the broader K-pop public while informing the norms of their local counterpublic, namely those of performing fandom well.

#### *The cover dance as citation*

Indeed, endemic to the cover dance genre is the reliance on sameness but also crucially, difference for its intelligibility. Cover dances constitute a more direct, apparent citation in that they create direct links to original K-pop performances. A citation is a discursive act that invokes two or more discourses in the same semiotic frame and is reflexive about that very act (Nakassis 2013). Without such metasemiotic understandings of sameness and difference, citations are not legible as such. Thus, those familiar with the cover dance genre know that the cover is a rendition of the original K-pop choreography. The intertextual gaps between the original K-pop dance and the cover dance are what allows for the latter to engage in semiotic work. My analytic interest here is in the semiotic leakages produced by such gaps. Citational acts can open up new horizons of signification and performative power (Derrida 1988; Nakassis 2016), enacting the potential for further actions and reactions.

The following section presents a semiotic analysis of Guys' Generation's recorded

cover dance of Girls' Generation's song "Gee," the best-selling single in South Korea of 2009 (SMTOWN 2009). The music video was released shortly thereafter in 2010. The video begins with the original nine members of Girls' Generation posing as mannequins in a clothing store while a handsome young male employee closes shop. Once he leaves, the mannequins come to life after hours and are shown swooning over a photo of the employee.



Figure 5. Mannequins come to life in Girls Generation's "Gee" music video

K-pop scholars argue that embodiment in K-pop dance reproduces broader societal gender norms (Epstein and Turnbull 2013; Oh 2014; Seabrook 2012). Oh (2014: 56) discusses Girls' Generation's racialized and gendered performance as characterized by "hypergirlish-femininity [sic] that prioritizes submissiveness, pureness and cuteness over the Westernized notion of powerful and independent womanly sexiness." While this characterization is somewhat simplified (since Girls' Generation's online video archive features performances that are indexically linked with overt displays of sexy femininity), the



“Gee” video and lyrics are inarguably imbued with aegyo in that the performers’ displays of affection include behaving in a coquettish or cheeky manner (Moon 2018; Strong 2012).

Several linguistic features have been identified for aegyo, including nasalization of oral segments, rising-falling intonation at prosodic boundaries, gendered lexical terms such as *oppa* (‘older brother’, usually used by women toward older men), and “infantile” sounds such as standalone gestures that express disagreement (Epstein and Turnbull 2013; Manietta 2010; Moon 2018). I would also add the use of rhetorical questions that index helplessness, such as *Eut-teo-ke ha-jyo*, ‘What should I/one do?’, repeatedly found in “Gee.” Aegyo is also performed bodily through facial expressions and gestures, such as shrugs, nods, and movements that express smallness and cuteness. Besides helplessness and childlikeness, these indexical features are highly gendered, tending to be associated with docile femininity.



Figure 6 and 7. Girls’ Generation member Yoona’s embodied *aegyo* in “Gee” video

This embodiment of smallness can be witnessed in the video, where the movements of the members of Girls’ Generation appear spatially restricted; docile femininity is indexed by such physical confinement as well as by the affective performance of unrequited heterosexual desire, as instantiated by their feigned sadness and swooning over the store employee. The video presents normative feminine bodies which are severely confined – both within the space of the store and the dance choreography. Furthermore, their wardrobes are

tight-fitting and restrictive, including high heels, reinforcing gender normativity through the modalities of gendered space and movement. The overall performance presents the members of Girls' Generation as innocent, naive, and helplessly in love, although it is done in a cute, unserious fashion, perhaps indexing a reflexiveness to the performance of aegyo.

In her reading of Girls' Generation's gender performance in "Gee," Oh (2014: 56) argues that Girls' Generation is able to "transcend[s] the triply burdened racialized, gendered, and classed status of Asian women by performing both whiteness/non-whiteness and Koreanness/non-Koreanness," thereby performing and projecting a hybrid contemporary Koreanness. Girls' Generation's performance in "Gee," according to Oh, accordingly subscribes to norms of femininity for young women in the Korean context, and especially for K-pop girl groups, namely a "mandatory cuteness" (Oh 2014: 63). A particular kind of aegyo in K-pop – called *oppa aegyo* – has been argued to allow industry actors to advance a kind of fandom that is meant to cater to heterosexual desires of older men while being packaged as an innocent and pure form of intimacy (Kang 2011).

When aegyo "travels" transnationally, it is often met with polarizing views ranging from glorification to misogynistic rejections ("Aegyo, Oppas, and Dirty Old Men" 2011). Kang (2014: 560) describes "the transnational performance of Korean femininity, and only Korean femininity, seemingly coordinated en masse" he observed while doing fieldwork in Thai gay bars with K-pop cover dancers. He describes the precision with which a Thai cover group called Boys' Generation aims to "become" their Girls' Generation counterparts, repeatedly practicing eye, lip, and wrist movements in order to perform aegyo on stage with great ease. Dunkel & Trammell (2021) discuss the use of the aegyo register by D.Va, a fictional character in the 2016 video game *Overwatch*. D.Va "utilizes aegyo in her speech

and mannerisms to connect to hallyu and as a way to channel the cutesy, whimsical attitude associated with [South Korean] youth” (180). The authors suggest that the character’s body is strategically gendered and racialized through the use of the aegyo register, which further softens D.Va’s otherwise militaristic features and prowess. Outside of Korea, then, the performance of aegyo may stand in for a particular kind of racialized femininity that semiotically ‘softens’. What might young Mexican men accomplish, then, when performing aegyo in their own K-pop counterpublic?



Figure 8. Guys’ Generation’s rendition of “Gee”

In their rendition, the members of Guys’ Generation aim for an exact replica of the original choreography (Guys’ Generation 2015). In mimetic fashion, the young men restrict their movements, which is especially notable in the movements of their hands, legs, and hips. The performance is predictably saturated with aegyo, including tilting of the head, winking, and coquettish looks at the camera. Each dancer occupies the role of a specific member of Girls’ Generation. The first dancer, for instance, commences the choreography with a short monologue in English (as in the original version), voicing Tiffany Hwang, one of the lead vocalists for Girls’ Generation. As is common in K-pop cover dance, each dancer’s embodiment of a different Girls’ Generation personality minimizes the intertextual – or more

aply, intersemiotic – gaps between their dance performance and the original. The citational semiotics of the dance performance, as with the discursive practices above, links Guys’ Generation’s practices to a global K-pop public while creating new indexical associations within their local counterpublic vis-à-vis gendered performance.

In our interviews, dancers’ metapragmatic discourse about their dance praxis reveals they do not orient to their performance of aegyo as a racialized register, but instead as solely a gendered one. In fact, one of the dancers, Toño, describes how he does not like performances of aegyo and prefers an overtly sexualized choreography.

#### Transcript 2

1	TOÑO; En lo personal,	Personally,
2	No me gustan,	I don’t like,
3	Eh,	Um,
4	grupos,	groups,
5	cute.	[that are] cute.
6	Las que hacen ae:gyo,	The ones that do aegyo,
7	Y son li:ndas.	Are are lovely,
8	A mí no me gustan.	I don’t like them.
9	Osea,	Like,
10	A mí no me gusta,	I don't like,
11	todos estos?	All these [K-pop groups]?
12	(0.2)	(0.2)
13	que son como:,	that are like,
14	(0.4)	(0.4)
15	pues coreografías,	well, choreographies,
16	cómo más,	like more,
17	(0.3)	(0.3)
18	no sé.	I dunno.
19	(0.1)	(0.1)
20	Como decirlo.	How to say it.
21	Se to:can,	They touch themselves,
22	sí,	yea,
23	sabes?	Ya know?
24	(0.3)	(0.3)
25	y se abren las pie:rnas y cosas así:,	and they open their legs and such,
26	más sensual,	more sensual,
27	y más sexual,	and more sexual,
28	hasta cierto punto.	to a certain extent.

Toño explicitly states that he does not like “cute” groups (line 4-5) and mentions the performance of aegyo specifically (line 6). The use of the feminine pronoun (*las* ‘the ones’, line 6) is instructive: Toño associates aegyo with female K-pop idols, a referent not previously introduced. The vowel lengthening in lines 6 and 7 – a gesture linked indexically to childlikeness – adds increased affect while the similar prosody of both lines generate a repeated tune, semiotically creating an air of exasperation or even irritation. Furthermore, Toño’s lengthening rhematizes indexical qualities associated with aegyo like childlikeness with a particular kind of feminine performance, which he finds absurd. Thus, aegyo register is not only linked indexically to a particular kind of child-like femininity, but iconically.

At first, Toño has some difficulty finding the words for the kind of choreography he prefers over displays of aegyo, as exemplified by his relatively long pauses (lines 14 and 17). He describes the kinds of movements he appreciates in K-pop dance (*se tocan* ‘they touch themselves’, line 21 *se abren las piernas* ‘they open their legs’, line 25). The slight vowel lengthening in *piernas* (‘legs’) again lends a tone of absurdity: this time, as though Toño is abashedly self-aware of his potentially lewd description. Nonetheless, he asserts his aesthetic preference for movements that are “más sensual y más sexual,” sexier choreography which is arguably less marked in the Mexican context than dance performances filled with displays of aegyo.

Toño’s avowed preference for sexier choreography orients towards an embodied expression of sensuality and sexuality that he later notes is not well accepted in the Mexican context. For his undergraduate thesis which he wrote and shared with me during my fieldwork, Toño critically reflects on his own performances of what he calls ‘amateur dance’. He describes the experience of being an amateur K-pop dancer as a cisgender man:

El baile. Mi forma de acercamiento hacia lo femenino es a través del baile. La danza es un arte en el que se tiene muy definido lo que debe hacer un hombre y lo que debe hacer una mujer, sin dejar lugar a dudas o a otras posibilidades.

*Dance (el baile). My way of approximating the feminine is through dance (el baile).*

*Dance (la danza) is an art in which what a man should do and what a woman should do are very clearly defined, without allowing for doubts or other possibilities.*

Toño's critical reflection is corroborated by numerous comments from dancers. In an email exchange, one male dancer described how his parents disapproved of his participation in K-pop dance: "[dicen] que el kpop es para niñas" ('[they say] that K-pop is for girls'). Such comments index dancers' awareness of the markedness of their performance in their local contexts and underscore the impact of the genre on their own identity formations. Dance, for Toño, is not merely a pastime or a profession; it is much more consequential. Dance acts as a way to "approximate" femininity (*acercamiento* in Toño's passage above), which is unimaginable in everyday life. Salient here is the distinction Toño makes between *el baile* and *la danza*: he delineates the former as more liberating and the latter as more prescriptive regarding gender norms. I interpret Toño's articulation of *el baile* as phenomenologically feminine – and hence, empowering. Insofar as gender is performative (Butler 1990, 1993), Toño's reflection shows that the expression of non-normative gender has an outlet in the form of K-pop dance performance.

#### *Gendered performance in the k-poper counterpublic*

The Guys' Generation dancers further elucidate the binaristic double standards for men and women performing K-pop dance within their local counterpublic in Mexico City. As the data reveal, being a k-poper is itself gendered:

Transcript 3

1	TOÑO; Hay,	There are,
2	(0.8)	(0.8)
3	cientos de grupos,	hundreds of groups,
4	de mujeres,	of women,
5	que bailan,	who dance,
6	a [BTS],	BTS,
7	MEMO; [BTS]	BTS
8	o a Shi:nee,	or Shinee,
9	JOY; Big Ba:ng,	Big Bang,
10	ver[ <sub>2</sub> dad].	right.
11	TOÑO; [ <sub>2</sub> y] so:n,	and they're,
12	movimientos muy masculi:nos.	really masculine movements,
13	[ <sub>3</sub> Sí es bien vi:sto].	Yes, it's well-received.
14	JOY; [ <sub>3</sub> ^Sú:per masculino].	Super masculine.
15	TOÑO; Pero si un ho:mbre,	But if a man,
16	baila Girls' Generation,	dances to Girls' Generation,
17	y se mueve,	and moves,
18	delicadamente,	daintily,
19	automáticamente,	automatically,
20	lo ridiculizan.	they ridicule him.

Toño points out a double standard for cisgender male bodies performing the choreography of girl bands. His hyperbolic statement about cover groups composed of women (*hay cientos de grupos de mujeres* ‘there are hundreds of groups of women’, lines 1-4) provides a contrast to how cisgender men are perceived, based on his and Memo’s experiential knowledge. They cite all-male K-pop bands like BTS and Shinee, known for their heavy orientation toward US hip hop conventions and hence, indexically masculine. The girl cover groups of these bands not only get away with ‘masculine’ choreography (line 12), but they are also received positively (line 13). The contrast occurs in line 15 when Toño offers a conditional sentence about how a man is viewed when dancing to the choreography of a girl band like Girls’ Generation in contrast to his description of women’s cover dances.

Even though he refers to *un hombre* ‘a man’ in the third person (line 15), he is clearly speaking about himself and his fellow dancers, given his mention of Girls’ Generation cover

dances specifically. Furthermore, he describes the movements as though he is aware of how his own body is perceived. The idea of moving “daintily” (line 18) is indexically feminine: an embodied habitus that is met with ridicule. The juxtaposition of ‘hundreds’ of female groups (lines 3-5) versus a single man (line 15) accentuates the markedness of a cisgender man performing gendered feminine choreography. According to participants, K-pop groups are already marked in the broader landscape of popular culture in Mexico, but men’s performance of feminized choreography is further marked, both within the broader public and their local counterpublic. Below I return to a discussion of why Guys’ Generation performs aegyo despite some members’ explicit preference for sexier choreography.

*Viewer uptake and gender markedness in the broader public*

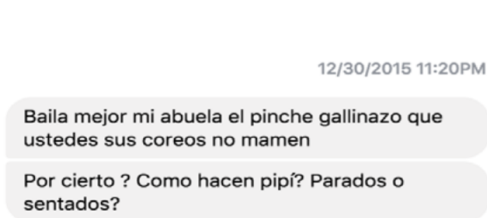
Guys’ Generation’s citation of K-pop in the public arena of Mexican social media leaves their performances open to varied responses from viewers, ranging from homophobic comments to gleeful fan support. As theorists of citationality have argued, citations proliferate indexical differences by introducing alternative meanings through new forms (Derrida 1988; Nakassis 2013). Legibility is key to how these performances are interpreted by viewers and relatedly to what kinds of norms are transgressed. The dancers’ and the online viewers’ metapragmatic discourses alike demonstrate that Guys’ Generation’s cover dance performance is marked in the Mexican context, while viewer responses are a reminder of the dialogic nature of identity (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2016; Zimman 2017).

In many K-pop cover dance groups within the global K-pop public, men’s performance of feminine choreography, while arguably transgressive, is sometimes met with great praise rather than ridicule. The rise of K-pop in Thailand, for instance, is said to generate new forms of queer performance wherein K-pop cover groups reach “demi-idol



status” with their own sizeable fan following (Käng 2014; Singhal 2016). Examining the reception of such K-pop cover dance in the Mexican context as well as dancers’ metapragmatic discourse surrounding their practices elucidates the transgression of locally meaningful categories. For instance, in our interviews, Toño and Memo explained to me that commenters often mock their performance by calling them “Guys’ Generation.” While most viewer comments are quite positive, homophobic comments remind the dancers that their performance is marked in their local context. While the following comments are from YouTube, the use of Mexican slang such as *pinche* ‘damned, fucking’ and *padre* ‘cool’ suggest that commenters share the same linguistic and cultural background as the dancers of Guys’ Generation.

Figure 9



*My fucking grandma dances better than you guys your choreographies get the fuck out of here*

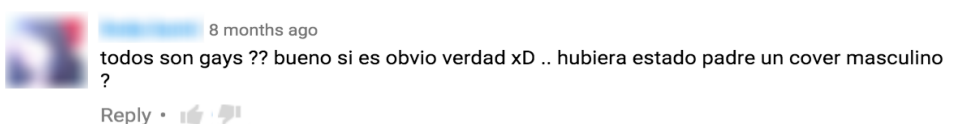
*By the way ? How do you pee? Standing or Sitting?*

Figure 10



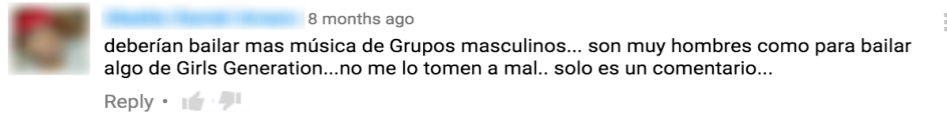
*Can you do covers of male groups, lazy asses?*

Figure 11



*Are you all gay ?? Well it's obvious right (laughing emoticon) .. a guy's/masculine cover would've been cool ?*

Figure 12



*You guys should dance more to guy groups.. you guys are too manly to dance to something by Girls Generation...don't get me wrong... it's just a comment...*

The metapragmatic discourses from Guys' Generation as well as from viewers reveal that the performance of gender is salient while the performance of race is not. In other words, young Mexican men's embodiment of aegyo is not interpreted as a performance of Korean femininity, and instead gets marked as a gender-transgressive performance rather than a cross-racial performance. As Memo and Toño noted above (Transcript 3), women's covers of K-pop boy bands is not marked either for gender or for race. The homophobic comments above – ranging from relatively mild prescriptive comments to crude mockery highlight the ideological mismatch between Guys' Generation's gendered choreography and their appropriate bodily comportment as Mexican men. In these comments, the members of Guys' Generation are not only interpellated as gendered subjects, but unruly ones who dangerously traverse the realm of indexical femininity. These comments function to regiment proper embodied habitus for young Mexican men.

*Discussion: Gender markedness and frictions among publics*

As argued above, performing K-pop cover dance allows young Mexican men to negotiate gender norms by temporarily embodying different identities, namely that of their beloved idols. However, the same dancers also articulate the markedness of their performance of feminized choreography in their local context. Since K-pop, a highly commodified and stylized genre, is easily consumed through digital media, young Mexican K-pop fans can

perform local counterpublic membership through their transcultural embrace of a ‘foreign’ genre. The performance of aegyo is especially pertinent in exposing perceived normative behavior for young Mexican men. Toño expresses a dispreference for aegyo, yet, in the video, he convincingly performs this style. Interestingly, members also display aegyo gestures in photos on social media or in live K-pop events, further emulating K-pop stars outside of the cover dance genre. What might account for this discrepancy between Toño’s discourse and his embodied performance? What warrants the friction between and within various publics to which dancers belong?

I argue that in performances of aegyo, gender transgression is much more salient than any potential reading of cross racial performance due to the intense stigmatization of transgressing masculinity as a male-assigned person in the Mexican context. Furthermore, the aegyo register indexes a particular kind of cute femininity that is not easily legible in the Mexican context, as opposed to an overtly sexy performance. Even as the performance of femininity is said to be phenomenologically empowering for members of Guys’ Generation (as Toño’s essay articulates), the hegemony of heteronormativity forces the young men to contend with how marked their embodied performances are within the larger Mexican public, to which they obviously simultaneously belong. Put differently, what is deemed desirable in the K-pop counterpublic and especially the K-pop cover dance is the appropriate citation of K-pop stars, included embodied similarity. The cover dance as an act of citation requires a convincing performance of gender and race (i.e. aegyo) in its pursuit of similarity, because sameness and difference are endemic to the genre and to citationality more broadly. Such norms of the Mexican K-pop counterpublic conflict with those of the broader Mexican public, a clash which helps to explain why dancers reject aegyo discursively even though

they embody it convincingly, since they are constrained by hegemonic norms of the broader public.

*Conclusion: The limits and possibilities of K-pop in Mexico*

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which Mexican youth talk about and participate in a global K-pop public, thereby contributing to their local K-pop counterpublic. K-pop dancers, by virtue of their discursive and embodied practice, are some of the most active members of the K-pop counterpublic. By citing their favorite K-pop stars through both embodied and linguistic strategies, K-pop dancers create interdiscursive links to globally recognized K-pop stars and their global fans. The proliferation of indexical links that citations make possible allows K-pop fans to harness the force of the global K-pop public for their own local needs. For the participants in my study, the cover dance genre allowed them to perform alternative gendered identities. In my close analysis of a cover dance performance, I argued that cisgendered men's performance of Korean femininity through the aegyo register – which is indexical of childlike, docile femininity – was perceived as highly gendered but not racialized by both practitioners and viewers. Part of this perceptual salience of gender over race is linked to locally hegemonic understandings of masculinity, which regiment gender performance within the broader Mexican public.

This study elucidates the ways in which engagement with K-pop allows Mexican youth to navigate their liminality between various (counter)publics. Even as I have argued that youth are performatively engaged in transgressive gender performance, cover dance does not represent unrestrained agency. It seeks to emulate a genre that is constantly attending to the demands of global capital. As my opening vignette elucidates, in the context of my research it was almost exclusively Mexican youth who consumed K-pop en masse. The K-pop

industry's aggressive marketing and ensuing consumerist patterns are sharp reminders of the aspirational limitations of citations. Still, numerous K-pop fans expressed that part of K-pop's appeal is both its foreignness and its inclusiveness. A member of Guys' Generation, Memo, described K-pop as *un género muy amplio* 'a wide/ample genre', confessing that "siento que...K-pop es muy inclusivo porque tienes muchas opciones" ('I feel that...K-pop is really inclusive because you have a lot of options'). Thus, numerous K-pop fans in Mexico find the genre to be inclusive and much more capacious than other genres already popularized in Mexico. As young Mexicans increasingly consume a globalized pop musical genre, their engagements also reinterpret and negotiate local norms, creating new possibilities for (re)imagination.

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## Chapter 3

### Mediations of intimacy: The multisensorial semiosis of mukbang

#### *Mediated intimacies: Mukbang as multisensorial care*

The broadcaster commences the video with an audible sigh. *I really wanted to eat this*, the broadcaster explains. The large pot of water to the right begins a gentle, rolling boil, the steam coming off the top. The uncut heads of bright orange kimchi are glimmering in his well-lit room. *Those look ripe*, I think to myself. A viewer asks about his esophagus. *What happened to your esophagus? It's about seventy percent better*, he reassures his viewers. Within a couple of minutes, five ramen are in the pot boiling. I find myself gulping back my saliva. He takes his first bite, an aerated slurp followed by furrowed brow as his scrunched face expresses intense pleasure. *Ah*. I catch myself smirking as he glances briefly at the chatbox. He proceeds to wrap a long piece of kimchi around the ramen noodles and slurps the combination with minimal chewing. *진짜 잘 먹는다*. *He really knows how to eat*, I think to myself.

In this chapter, I examine the complex multimodal work of *mukbang*, a genre of livestreamed web show that features a broadcaster who consumes large quantities of food. The spectacular nature of *mukbang* typically derives from the quantity of food consumed, the types of food featured, the quality of eating (e.g., boisterous, messy, methodical), and often, food preparation. The term *mukbang* is a blend of the Korean verb *meok-da* ‘to eat’ and *bang-song* ‘broadcast’. *Mukbang* stars are known as *broadcasting jockeys* (*BJ*, for short). The genre first emerged in South Korea in 2009. Some commentators credit *mukbang*’s rapid rise in popularity with viewers’ loneliness due to the increasing number of Koreans who live alone (Chen 2018; Kim 2018) – a trope that is widely circulated in popular sources – but this

correlation is tenuous. What is certain is that the number of single-family households in South Korea has increased dramatically in the last three decades, leading to a shift in dynamics vis-à-vis the consumption of food (Kim 2015). Moreover, as of 2015, a quarter of all households in South Korea are single-person, a trend that is projected to increase, drastically shaping food culture and food-related entertainment content.

Broadcasting trend surveys have shown that viewers overwhelmingly and consistently demand content related to the preparation and consumption of food, such as competitive cooking shows and food-focused travel shows. The proliferation of linguistic blends like *hon-bap* ‘eating alone’ (*hon-* from *hon-ja* ‘alone’ and *bap* ‘food’) and *hon-bap-jok* ‘people who eat alone’ (*jok* meaning ‘kin’) attests to the popular awareness of shifts in eating trends. For some viewers, mukbang is said to be a way to experience eating vicariously through a broadcaster. According to linguist Choe (2019: 171), “mukbang provides and supports a virtual platform for sociable eating.” “Sociable eating” here refers to eating as a symbiotic and shared relationship between viewers and the broadcaster. In sum, while the sheer number of single-person households has increased in South Korea and will continue to do so, thereby shaping food culture and marketing strategies, the psychosocial reasons for mukbang’s popularity in the Korean context are less clear. A recent quantitative analysis of mukbang viewership by South Korean college students found that the principal motivation for watching mukbang was, in fact, not loneliness per se, but simply a mundane leisure activity and a form of entertainment (Xue Jin & Hwang 2019).

*A multisensorial semiotic approach to language and materiality*

While much of the recent literature on mukbang has offered psychosocial explanations for its popularity, I aim to read mukbang performances as social texts which include the micro-level

interplays of language and the body, including displays of emotion. In this chapter, I demonstrate how online eating performances constitute a multisensorial experience by examining the various communicative modes (Norris 2004) by which the genre operates. As I show, mukbang is a carefully crafted form of emotional labor in which mukbang stars discursively and embodiedly transmit affect, thereby creating possibilities for constrained sociality online.

Mediatization facilitates affective connection online, and, as I show, mukbangers frequently take on the role of caregiver for their viewers. The mukbang artist performs intimacy for an imagined, invisible, and geographically and temporally distant audience by discursively framing them as supportive friends and confidants. By contrast to many other genres on YouTube, intimacy is intensified in mukbang performances due to the primacy of the body (Kim 2020) and the sociality of the eating event. By focusing on the multimodal and multisensory nature of mukbang performances, I show how online emotional labor is achieved, contending that such eating shows are key sites to explore in understanding the possibilities and constraints of mediated intimacy.

Language and materiality – and crucially, language as materiality – are key to the performances I analyze. Following Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012), I reject a Cartesian dualism that treats the material as having particular physical qualities and the immaterial as relegated to an ideational or perhaps even metaphysical realm. Materiality is defined here as “the state or quality of being material, embedded within and taking meaning and value from sociocultural and political economic structures and processes” (Shankar & Cavanaugh 2012: 456; cf. Faudree 2017). In line with the linguistic-anthropological literature on the semiotics of the senses, I treat language and communication more broadly as emergent forms of

materiality. More specifically, an attention to sensually experienced qualities and feelings, or qualia, allows me to identify sociocultural events of qualitative experience as they emerge in interaction. In mediatized contexts, this semiotic approach to the study of sensuous qualities must attend to various forms and configurations of interactions involving the broadcaster, food item, and viewers. Examining sensorial experience semiotically also draws attention to the porousness of virtual and “offline” social practices as well as underscoring the profoundly embodied possibilities of mediatized encounters.

### *Methods*

By combining microlevel linguistic analyses with the affordances of ethnography, this study aims to look at both micro interactions and the macro dimensions of mukbang performances. Given the sparse but rapidly increasing literature on mukbang, as well as the largely uncontested folk theories surrounding its rise to popularity, I opted for a thick description of this phenomenon by examining Korean-language popular and academic sources, mukbang features in other Korean entertainment genres, publicly available interviews of mukbang stars, viewer comments and fan videos on YouTube, and Reddit forum discussions and fan pages dedicated to mukbang. I also conducted interviews with fifteen self-identified mukbang viewers in the summer of 2020, which supplemented my own firsthand experiences as a consumer of mukbang since 2017. I also created my own YouTube channel in spring 2020 in order to better understand from an emic perspective the media ideologies (Gershon 2010) and general production process of a content creator.

The data for the media analysis portion of this chapter come from a series of YouTube videos by South Korean mukbang star Bazz. Bazz is a particularly interesting mukbanger because he started on the South Korean streaming platform AfreecaTV but eventually created

a YouTube channel and now operates almost exclusively on that platform. Hence, one can see how his videos have changed over time to conform to the affordances and media ideologies of YouTube as well as the demands of a transnational viewership.

My analyses of the video data focus on semiotic practices with a particular attention to language and embodiment. The video was chosen based on the large number of viewers, a straightforward metric for the popularity of the video on his channel. I identified key segments in the video that were representative of his broadcasting style as well as key moments of affective display. I closely transcribed these segments for language and embodiment using ELAN, a transcription software program developed by the Max Planck Institute. ELAN is the optimal tool for the purposes of this project given my attention to embodied action. Each communicative mode (Norris 2004) was transcribed as a separate tier in ELAN: gestures, gaze, spoken discourse, written discourse, and eating sounds. Following Choe (2019) on the interactional features of mukbang, I aimed for a transcription method that best captures the multimodal dynamism in the data by incorporating spoken discourse as well as embodied action.

Gestures were transcribed using Hoenes del Pinal's (2011) conventions for transcribing gesture units, that is, segmentable embodied actions that take place between two "neutral" positions. Borrowing from Kendon (2004: 112), Hoenes del Pinal describes three parts to a gesture unit: preparation, stroke, and withdrawal. Transcribing gestures in this way allowed me to examine shorter segments of gestures and their potential immediate functions and meanings as well as to scale up the analysis of longer performances that encompass several gestural units. Transcription conventions were adapted from the Santa Barbara Discourse



Transcription system (Du Bois 2015) to include embodied actions, following conventions in Norris (2004) and Hoenes del Pinal (2011).

*Mukbang as generic hitchhiker*

In the Korean context, mukbang first appeared on the livestream platform AfreecaTV as early as 2009 (Kim 2015). AfreecaTV is a South Korean video streaming service that allows users to interact in real time through a chat box. Viewers can also pay broadcasters with ‘virtual balloons’, a type of online currency, which can then be converted to cash through the AfreecaTV platform. Upwards of 45,000 viewers from all over the world tune in to watch some of the more well-known mukbang channels, and top-ranked stars can make up to about \$10,000 a month, including sponsorships (Hu 2015). As a testament to the genre’s popularity in South Korea, local fan clubs have even emerged around well-known mukbang stars. As of 2019, approximately 3,500 mukbang channels are in operation on AfreecaTV (Jin & Hwang 2019).

Due to its rapidly expanding popularity on AfreecaTV, mukbang has been invoked frequently in Korean media to describe any spectacular eating event. For instance, in Korean variety shows, celebrities who eat boisterously are described as engaging in or hosting a mukbang. A particularly noticeable food scene in a movie or television drama might later be described as a mukbang in a highlight reel (KBS World TV 2016). Similarly, a celebrity may be instructed to consume food in the form of a mukbang on a variety entertainment program in order to highlight the preparation of food or for comedic effect. Mukbang, then, is so ubiquitous in the Korean entertainment context that it is frequently embedded in other types of programming. Viewers appear to derive pleasure in watching celebrities in the otherwise mundane act of eating, but in this case, the eating is usually characterized by a lack of restraint and bolstered by editing effects that add additional entertainment value. The popularity of

mukbang as a standalone genre is said to inform the rise of food-related content in other realms of Korean popular culture, including food-related competition shows, cooking shows, and even the visual prominence of meals in Korean soap operas (Ci & Khiun 2019; Hong & Park 2017; Kim 2015).

The mukbang genre has taken on different forms with the rise of YouTube as the premiere video-sharing website in the 2000s and especially in the 2010s. The advent of monetization (the process whereby content creators make money based on views accrued on eligible clips) on YouTube in particular and some controversy on the AfreecaTV streaming platform regarding excessive punitive measures for false advertising have encouraged mukbang broadcasters to switch to YouTube. Thus, the change in generic conventions is due in large part to the unique affordances of YouTube. For instance, YouTube is not primarily known to be a livestreaming service, although this option exists for verified users. Since the platform promotes asynchronous content, broadcasters can script, edit, and add effects to their videos, which also tend to be much shorter in length (usually under 30 minutes) than mukbang broadcasts on the AfreecaTV platform, which can last up to several hours. YouTube mukbang broadcasters tend not to interact with viewers in real time, but typed comments allow for iterative feedback from viewers, including reactions to the video and feedback for future content. Another factor that shapes the contours of mukbang on YouTube is the influence of more established autochthonous genres like makeup tutorials, vlogs, and haul videos. Makeup tutorials are videos about cosmetic products and applications, and vlogs (video blogs) are regularly uploaded videos that follow an individual or small group, usually centered around their everyday lives. Haul videos feature individuals who reveal and describe products they have purchased. Many of these genres include already-enregistered features like introductory

remarks and editing effects such as an animated introduction. Moreover, while mukbang exists as a standalone genre on YouTube, it also fuses with a number of other genres to produce subgenres such as the challenge video, lifestyle (or storytelling) mukbang, mukbang vlogs, and ASMR mukbangs. In sum, mukbang has rapidly become its own identifiable genre outside of South Korea, with even Korean mukbangers on YouTube adapting to generic features popularized by US-based content creators.

*Banzz: The playful BJ*

As mukbang became increasingly prominent on YouTube, numerous Korean mukbang stars who previously only operated on the AfreecaTV platform have since created YouTube channels. One such broadcaster is Jeong Man-Soo, who goes by the moniker Banzz (벤쯔, pronounced /baent͡ʃi/). Banzz started his career on AfreecaTV and was one of the earliest Korean stars to move over to YouTube in 2013. He is undoubtedly one of the most famous mukbang personalities in South Korea – even winning the highest award in the genre at the 2016 AfreecaTV Awards – and is a frequent guest on Korean food-related variety shows and talk shows related to food. In tandem with his voracious eating, Banzz’s physical appearance is the topic of much discussion. He has publicly described mukbang as his hobby and his real job as working out, sometimes as much as four to six hours a day.

His broadcasting style can be characterized as a talkative, upbeat, polite-if-not-cheeky demeanor, and he interacts frequently with viewers when broadcasting live. The video analyzed here, titled “I really wanted to eat ramen...5 Samyang ramen! Mukbang,” lasts just under one hour and was broadcast live on YouTube on December 17, 2016, and subsequently uploaded on December 24, 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWkA6Wa->

R0s&t=1536s). At the time of analysis (December 2019), this video had 13,195,738 views and was the most viewed video on his channel.

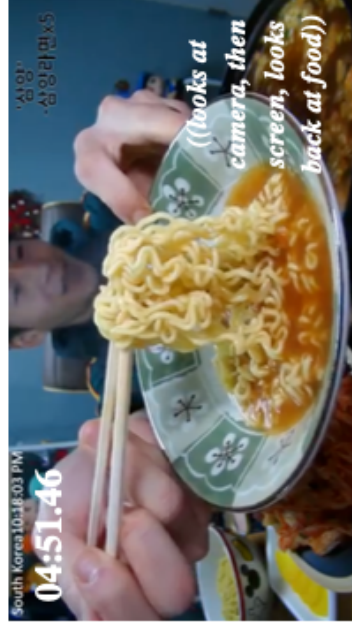
The following segment includes a number of linguistic and embodied strategies whereby Banzz creates a pleasurable experience for his viewers. These include linguistic choices – especially in his use of an address term to refer to his fans – as well as gaze and other embodied action to simulate an eating event. Such multimodal dynamism allows Banzz to digitally simulate and create the conditions for commensality, the sharing of food and eating in a social setting (Spence, Mancini, & Huisman 2019). To an unassuming viewer, Banzz may appear to just be eating, but a multimodal analysis shows the complex interplay of language and the body that is required to create a performance that is maximally pleasing to viewers. In the transcript below, italics mark embodied action while a double parentheses mark gaze.

Transcript 1 [04:51.46 - 05:14.13]

1



((looks down at food))



((looks at camera, then screen, looks back at food))

Brings bowl close to camera and holds noodles with chopsticks

((looks at screen))

자 님들도 드시고 싶으시죠.

ja nim-deul-do deu-si-go sip-eu-si-jyo.

'Now you guys/all want to have some too, don't you?'

2



Blows on noodles. Slurps broth.



Hx.  
((looks at screen))  
holds noodles up with chopsticks

3



*Blows on noodles.*



*Takes a large bite and slurps loudly.*

4



*((looks at kimchi, then looks at screen))*



*Mm.  
((Closes eyes briefly))*

# 5



*((looks at screen))*



*((looks at camera))  
Raises right thumb*

This short clip presents a number of multimodal features that constitute a form of affective labor on the part of the broadcaster by catering explicitly to viewer expectations. The embodied action of moving the bowl towards the camera (line 1) combined with the rhetorical question ‘You all want some too, don’t you?’ (line 2) (re)creates the act of commensality, or sharing food and eating in a social setting. The motion of offering the food to the viewer suggests a kind of role play that simulates the act of eating together: Bazz frames himself as hosting both the broadcast and the meal as a social event. Additionally, the orientation of the food – as indexed by the camera angle – suggests that the viewer is being served food. This physical role play of commensality is similar to how videogamers lean forward to simulate movements of their player or avatar as though their physical action would make a difference in the virtual world (Keating & Sunakawa 2010: 351). Here, we see Bazz creating a similar merging of worlds as well as experiential immediacy.

In his roleplay as a hospitable host, Bazz performs a playful, down-to-earth persona in large part by straddling the line between acceptably cheeky and polite. Salient throughout all of Bazz’s videos is the use of *nim-deul*, a polite plural nominal form that has become a signature linguistic move for him. The usage of *nim-deul* by other Korean speakers is not inconceivable in everyday use, but Bazz does use it with great frequency. *Nim-deul* combines the nominal honorific marker *-nim* (i.e. a polite affix that is used as an honorific) and *-deul*, a plural marker (Choi 2003; Pollard & Sag 1994). The suffix *-nim* indicates the elevated position or status of the referent of the noun. For instance, *-nim* is frequently attached to nouns like *ui-sa* ‘doctor’ or *seon-saeng* ‘teacher’ to produce the honorific form, indicating respect or regard in the case of these occupations. In addition to its use for someone who is revered, admired or otherwise of higher rank, it can also be used as an honorific for unfamiliar individuals. Further,



many instantiations of *-nim* are fully lexicalized, as in the case of *son-nim* ‘guest’ or *ha-na-nim* ‘god’. The blended form used by Bazz, *nim-deul*, is highly marked because both *-nim* and *-deul* are suffixes, and this collocation is not frequently used in everyday speech. In this neologism, *-nim* is treated as a noun, and *nim-deul* may be glossed in American English as ‘you all/y’all’ or ‘you guys’. This innovative use of the hyperformal form *-nim* allows Bazz to address his viewers in a friendly and colloquial, yet polite, manner, thereby producing a humorous and playful effect, as is common in wordplay. *Nim-deul*, then, is pragmatically informal but structurally and semiotically polite/formal, thus indexing an irony and playfulness that contributes to Bazz’s signature broadcasting style.

In his role as a playful host, he creates an interactive, pleasurable eating experience by managing different perspectives. Additionally, Bazz’s shifts in gaze in line 1, frame 2 give clues as to how his stationary equipment setup allows for such digital commensality: he presumably has a second screen to his left (the viewer’s right) that shows him what the viewer sees. An analysis of his eye gaze reveals that he is constantly managing multiple perspectives: he begins by looking at the camera in the direction of the food he is offering, but then he shifts his gaze to the screen to his left, then back to the camera (line 1). These shifts in gaze indicate that he is visually confirming that the food is properly displayed. When an item is moved closer to the camera, the lens requires some time to adjust its perspective in order to focus on the item properly. Bazz’s shift back to looking at the food-in-hand after looking at the screen (line 1, frame 2) is a coordinated move to calibrate his hand movements accordingly – namely, to keep the food still – to allow the camera to zoom in on the food and display it clearly to the viewer. This active management of gaze shows that Bazz strives to emphasize the food’s visual texture for his viewers’ pleasure. His eye gaze in lines 2, 4, and 6 demonstrate that he is

constantly overseeing various frames of reference and plotting his next move in a dynamic choreography of eating. By ensuring a pleasurable viewing experience, this management of perspectives, too, is affective labor for the viewer.

*“My heart will never change”: Linguistic and embodied affect in mukbang*

In the opening minutes of the same video, before any eating has begun, Banzz tells his viewers that there is something he wants to tell them in advance: he has been invited to participate in various television and radio broadcasts featuring other guest celebrities. In the following transcript, he follows this news by expressing some ambivalence about working with famous people, thereby distancing himself from celebrity status. Instead, he expresses his gratitude towards his viewers, whom he credits for his successes. His extended displays of gratitude accompanied by a lengthy explanation about his commercial endeavors constructs his relationship with his viewers as one of commitment and indebtedness. (During this segment, most of Banzz’s embodied actions are dedicated to food preparation; hence, I have included transcriptions of verbal utterances and embodied actions of note – especially gaze – given my analytic focus on his verbal explanation to fans.)

Transcript 2 [02:14.41 - 02:43.83]

- 1BANZZ; 근데  
geun-de,  
but  
*((looks up))*
- 2 저는 진짜  
jeo-neun jin-jja-  
I really-  
*((looks to side of room))*
- 3 *((looks down at pot as he prepares noodles))*  
그렇다고 해도  
geu-leoh-da-go hae-do, (00:02:16.287 - 00:02:17.390)  
even if that’s the case

- 4            정말  
              jeong-mal,  
              really
- 5            제일 감사 하는 거는  
              je-il gam-sa ha-neun geo-neun,  
              the thing I'm most grateful for
- 6            제거 시청해 주시는 분들  
              je-geo si-cheong-hae ju-si-neun bun-deul,  
              All of you who watch my [show]
- 7            님들이거든요  
              nim-deul-i-geo-deun-yo.  
              is all of you.  
              *((looks at camera))*
- 8            *((looks to screen, looks down at food, back at screen))*  
              저도  
              jeo-do,  
              I, too,
- 9            그분들이랑  
              geu-bun-deul-i-lang,  
              with those people
- 10           같이 방송 하는 게  
              gat-i bang-song ha-neun ge,  
              being on a show with them
- 11           신기 하고 그래서  
              sin-gi ha-go geu-lae-seo,  
              is novel/amusing and so,
- 12           제가 그때는  
              je-ga geu-ttae-neun,  
              at those times, I  
              *moves right hand to chest*
- 13           저 막 신나거나  
              jeo mag sin-na-geo-na,  
              I might be all excited  
              *((looks to right side, then looks at screen))*
- 14           그렇긴 하지만  
              geu-leoh-gin ha-ji-man,

that might be the case,  
*((looks at food, then looks to right, then looks at screen))*

15        제일 감사하다는  
          je-il gam-sa-ha-da-neun,  
          that I'm most grateful  
          *((looks at camera, then down at food))*  
          *Suspends both hands in the air, left hand open*

16        *Moves noodles around in pot*  
          말씀을 드리고 싶은 것은  
          mal-sseum-eul deu-li-go sip-eun geo-neun,  
          but what I want to tell you

17        제거 방송 봐주시는  
          je-geo bang-song bwa-ju-si-neun,  
          Who watch my show

18        *((looks at camera, then down at food))*  
          넌들이니깐  
          nim-deul-i-ni-kkan,  
          are you all so

19        *((looks at camera, at food, then screen))*  
          제 마음은 항상 변치 않을 겁니다  
          je ma-eum-eun hang-sang byeon-chi anh-eul geob-ni-da.  
          my heart will never change  
          *((looks at screen, then looks at food))*

20        봐주시는 분들  
          bwa-ju-si-neun bun-deul,  
          those of you who watch/are watching  
          *((looks at camera then left side))*

21        정말 감사합니다  
          jeong-mal gam-sa-hab-ni-da.  
          Thank you so much.  
          *((looks at chat/screen))*

After Banzz shares his exciting news of being invited to participate in entertainment programs, he downplays his achievements – and indeed, his own agency – by pivoting from his news to crediting his viewers for his successes. Instead, he discursively creates a contrast between

celebrities and his loyal viewership. The contrastive conjunction *but* in line 1 marks a sharp break in content (i.e. the opportunity to work with celebrities) as Banzz begins a heartfelt expression of gratitude. He also shifts his gaze upwards (line 1) as though pensively considering his next words. His false start in line 2 ‘I really-’ indicates uncertainty and earnestness as he appears to be looking for the right words. His affective expression of gratitude in lines 4-7 is heightened by his shift in gaze in line 7, when Banzz halts food preparation and momentarily looks at the camera, which gives the impression of looking the viewer(s) directly in the eye. His gaze – a locking of eyes, if you will – creates a momentary intimacy with the viewer that matches the content of his words. At multiple points, he stresses how grateful he is (lines 5, 15, 21) and makes a verbal commitment, stating that his feelings toward his viewers will never change (line 19), a future promise that also indexes a preexisting relationship. Such a promise also suggests a long lasting partnership in which he will not be swayed by celebrity and vows to stay true to his *nim-deul*, his original mukbang fans. The numerous shifts in eye gaze in lines 19-21 show him vacillating from the camera (viewer) to the chat box (viewers’ responses) in order to monitor live fans’ responses to his heartfelt display.

Even though Banzz is inarguably a celebrity in his own right, as described above, Banzz refers to celebrities as ‘those people’ in line 8 – deictically distancing himself from celebrity status. He admits to finding celebrities interesting or amusing (line 11) and feeling excited by their presence (line 13). The preposition ‘too’ in line 8 (‘I, too’) and the future timeframe ‘at those times’ (line 12), coupled with the subtle embodied gesture of bringing his right hand to his chest (line 12), suggest moments of understandable weakness: he will naturally find celebrities interesting because he is an average guy, just like his viewers. By aligning himself with his viewers while describing events that have not yet occurred, Banzz asks his viewers

for support and understanding in advance regarding situations that necessitate his mingling with celebrities. In lines 8-14, Bazz discursively distances himself from celebrity status by creating a “them” (celebrities) versus “us” (mukbang viewers) dichotomy despite his own approximation – and, arguably, achievement – of celebrity status. His reassurance to his viewers of his commitment to them functions to construct his persona as humble and down-to-earth.

After Bazz creates a dichotomy between celebrities and himself and his viewers, he resumes his verbal expressions of gratitude, emphasizing a sense of indebtedness towards his viewers and performing a child-like vulnerability on screen. In line 15, he displays an embodied openness with his hands and arms briefly suspended in the air. The heartfelt expression of gratitude functions semiotically with his open body posture and direct gaze to index emotional openness. Throughout this segment, and indeed throughout Bazz’s performances broadly, there are numerous instances of phrase-final vowel lengthening (lines 3, 7, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 21). Final lengthening in Korean is strongly associated with LHL% intonation, which in turn is indexically linked to the *aegyo* register (as discussed in Chapter 2). *Aegyo* is an embodied and linguistic style associated with displays of affect indexing smallness or childlikeness and often described as ‘cute’ (Moon 2018; Strong 2012). Moon (2018) argues that the tonal shape of LHL% in Korean is a language-specific characteristic that iconically represents a physical *aegyo* gesture, such as embodied cuteness or overt displays of affection. In this example, the indexical associations of lengthening – childlikeness, cuteness – allow Bazz to perform a vulnerability and dependence on his viewers while not veering too much from his overall lighthearted and playful persona. This performance also highlights the

(indirectly indexed) power differentials between viewers and broadcaster, who must continue to perform an indebtedness to fans to ensure an enduring partnership.

*Socialization through qualia, or how to use kimchi as a wrap*

A common strategy among mukbangers is the overt performance of expertise vis-à-vis knowledge about food items and ways of eating. The following example shows Banzz performing such expertise, not only through overt linguistic instructions or descriptions, but through a complex multimodal choreography which involves various sensorial semiotic processes. At this point in the broadcast, Banzz has already consumed five packs of instant ramen and has prepared five more with the addition of eggs. He addresses a question from his viewers about his public decision to donate the prize money which accompanied his AfreecaTV award for best mukbang broadcaster of the year. Earlier in the video, he divulged that he plans to donate the money to a local Korean charity and acknowledges that viewers may have differing perspectives on the question of whether to donate to a local or foreign charity. As he continues discussing this topic, a large piece of kimchi catches his eye.

Transcript 3 [33:07.25 - 33:34.75]

1



*((looks at kimchi))*  
근데.  
geun-de.  
'But.'



*Sifts through kimchi with chopsticks*  
그건 사람마다,  
geu-geon sa-lam-ma-da,  
'for each person that's,'

2



*Picks up piece of kimchi with chopsticks*

오:  
o:  
'o:h'



*((looks at screen))*  
생각이 다르고 하니깐.  
saeng-gag-i da-leu-go ha-ni-kkan.  
'They'll have different opinions.'



3



((looks at kimchi))  
Spreads out kimchi with chopsticks



Holds up kimchi  
(FRICATIVE VOICE GESTURE)

4



이거는,  
i-geo-neun,  
'this one,'  
brings kimchi close to camera and holds  
((looks at screen))



진짜 삼싸 먹어야 돼요.  
jin-ja ssam-ssa meog-eo-ya-dwae-yo.  
'you really have to use it as a wrap,'  
lays kimchi on top of ramen  
((looks down at bowl))

5



Licks two fingers  
((looks at screen))



넓직한거는  
<HARSH> neolb-jeo:g</> han-geo-neun,  
'the ones that are wide/flat,'  
Picks up kimchi and ramen with chopsticks  
((looks at screen))

6



((looks at food))  
Moves head towards food



Places food in mouth, chews

7



*Left hand picks up bowl, slurps*



*((looks at screen))*

Banzz's gaze in line 1 shows that he remains concentrated on the next sequence of eating even as he continues to discuss topic at hand: the donation of money. His embodied actions are completely focused on eating, as he looks over at the kimchi (frame 1) and begins to sift through it (frame 2). As he reaches for a piece of kimchi, one particularly wide piece catches his eye, as exemplified by his surprised look and interjection *oh* in line 2, frame 1. Although he continues the same topic (line 2, frame 2), his embodied gestures show he has already begun to shift attention to the very large piece of kimchi, which he spreads out with his chopsticks (line 3, frame 1) in preparation to display for viewers.

When he holds up the kimchi with his chopsticks (line 3, frame 2), he produces what Harkness (2011:103) has called a (reactive) fricative voice gesture (FVG): "emission[s] of sound produced when air passes through sites of frication along the supralaryngeal vocal tract." The production of this FVG has the metacommunicative function of drawing the viewers' attention to the food object (here, the piece of kimchi). More specifically, Banzz's FVG acts as an interjection which shifts the topic and publicly creates an impressed affective response, thereby soliciting viewer attention. This response communicates to his viewers that the physical characteristics of the food item – its size and leafiness – are qualities that ought to impress and stimulate the viewer as well. Banzz immediately offers a closeup in line 4, frame 1, holding the piece of kimchi close to the camera for a relatively long time of four seconds, just enough time for the lens to focus properly. These visual, linguistic, and embodied modes of communication act as qualic descriptions, qualia being indexes that are experienced or witnessed phenomenally as sensuous qualities (Chumley and Harkness 2013; Harkness 2015, 2021).

Banzz's directed attention to qualia of eating and food items through multimodal means functions to socialize viewers by drawing attention to creative or "proper" ways of eating. The multimodal display of qualia continues with Banzz's overt linguistic descriptions in line 4 frame 2 ('you really have to use it as a wrap'), coupled with an embodied demonstration of draping the kimchi over the ramen. After this brief verbal and visual explanation, he looks immediately at the chat box to monitor his viewers' reactions (line 5, frame 1). In line 5, frame 2, he emphasizes the 'wide/flat' pieces of kimchi, holding up the kimchi wrapped around the ramen. He continues the socializing performance by providing a qualifier for the type of kimchi that ought to be used as a wrap. In this line, Banzz produces what Harkness calls a prosodic FVG over the second syllable of *neolb-jeog*. A prosodic FVG, by contrast to a reactive FVG, is superimposed onto an utterance for the purposes of intensification, whereas the latter is a standalone gesture. By intensifying *neolb-jeog* in this way, Banzz iconizes food qualities (here, 'wide/flat' pieces of kimchi) with positive affective intensity. Such are the pieces that inspire excitement and which viewers ought to use in creative ways when eating. Finally, he places the food in his mouth and slurps loudly, immediately checking the screen to monitor viewer responses to his characteristically large bites and minimal chewing. This brief encounter with a piece of kimchi and Banzz's positive linguistic stance toward it, coupled by an embodied demonstration of creative ways of using it, acts as a moment of socialization. Banzz's performance encourages similar affective stances from viewers while demonstrating an expertise about ways of eating.

*Conclusion: The limits of care in mukbang*

This chapter has focused on the genre of mukbang, which, despite its origins on Korean streaming platforms, has become an increasingly popular genre on YouTube. By focusing on

the performance of Korean mukbanger Bazz – one of the most well-known BJs – I showed that mukbang constitutes a carefully orchestrated multimodal performance that involves multiple senses. My analysis demonstrated how viewer-fan relationships are created and sustained in the moment of interaction with viewers, even when such performances are asynchronous. Mukbang performances highlight the roles of language, materiality, and embodied action – a complex multisensorial semiosis – in crafting mediated care and sociality in digitally mediated contexts.

Even as mukbangers work incessantly to create the conditions to simulate digital commensality through food and conversation, the intimacy they work so hard to foster is also fraught and their connections with viewers often amorphous and tenuous. In summer 2019, Bazz faced legal charges of false advertising and uploaded an apology video clarifying the incident. He was heavily criticized by mukbang viewers for subsequently deleting negative viewer comments on his apology video, leading to a significant drop in followers in 2020. These incidents show that mukbangers – even the most successful ones – rely on fans’ appraisal of their performances and perceived authenticity, pointing to the motives behind and limitations of intimacy fostered by mukbang broadcasters.

Furthermore, mukbang performances may reify normative bodies while contesting normative social norms, especially as they relate to eating (e.g. alone, without restraint). In a global context, affects may rely on normatively attractive gendered racialized bodies for their legibility and uptake. As mentioned above, Bazz’s physical embodiment is a frequent topic of discussion in Korean variety shows and other YouTubers’ channels, including fan videos. While beyond the scope of this chapter, in considering the multisensorial experience fostered by mukbangers, I wonder how the performance of excessive eating is limited to normative

embodiment. In order to examine how particular bodies are rendered linguistically and affectively legible, further research might examine the ways in which the semiosis of virtual performance relies on broader sociocultural meanings of race and gender.

## Transcription Conventions

- (( )) Double parentheses mark eye gaze
  - text* Italics mark embodied action
  - ,
  - .
  - ?
- Commas indicate continuing intonation.
- Periods indicate falling intonation.
- Question marks indicate rising intonation.



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## Chapter 4

### Selling authenticity: Nostalgia and sensorial experience in K-beauty

“Embodiment is the ground on which the woman of color has been denigrated and affirmed. To talk about celebrity and glamour for the woman of color is, therefore, to reckon with the collision between the violence of impersonality and the violence of personality.” –Anne

Cheng (2019:65)



### *My first K-beauty set*

My eyes were drawn immediately to the pristine, rectangular box, its subtle glitter flickering on the smooth surface, bouncing pinks and purples off the white packaging like freshly fallen snow. Its newness radiated, imbuing the shiny plastic with almost mythical quality. An already-opened package was displayed and propped invitingly in a prominent corner of the crammed store; its contents: tiny little plastic homes perfectly cradling each bottle of toner, essence, and emulsion. Their collective and various hues of blue, otherworldly and calming, promised hydration: an undoing of past days spent recklessly in the sun.

Even before purchase, I couldn't resist running my hand along the lid's waxy coating, forming a tactile bond with this white box filled with various potions. The titillating prospect of owning it drowned out the familiar sounds and smells of the San Fernando Valley strip mall cramped with small Korean businesses. I was oblivious to what was surely an unfathomable price for a preacher's income. It was a beautiful indulgence: a secret between me and *umma*. A mother – appropriately socializing her daughter in the ways of feminine beauty and its proper maintenance.

This unadulterated package held such potentiality. It would soothe parental anxieties, preserve a capricious child's youth and innocence, a daughter so determined to live in the present. It reassured a kind of reversal, animated a future of adolescent desirability. Unwrapping the plastic and finally opening that box marked a kind of affective rupture, issuing an unfamiliar register of personal responsibility: that of shaping feminine beauty in a way that was consistent, disciplined, vigilant. What were the promises underlying this beautiful packaging of iridescent blues? What futures were offered by that pristine white box with its persuasive shimmer? And what anxieties was it simultaneously soothing and producing?

### *The politics of K-beauty*

In offering this vignette of curated nostalgia (Khan 2020), I attempt to foreground my own lived experience in and around Korean beauty practices and norms in order to accentuate and problematize a politics of beauty in which I have been socialized. This rather mundane childhood memory – recently resuscitated by my scholarly curiosities – underscores the ways the purchase of a box of Korean beauty products marked an intimate socialization experience between mother and daughter. The invocation of my own memories seeks to blur the lines

between myself as researcher and the object of analysis – here, K-beauty (i.e. *Korean beauty*) discourses – as I have been intimately mired in the politics of (K-)beauty since childhood, as my vignette intimates. I foreground this emic perspective, which is not informed by a single field site, but accrued over years of fluctuating social contexts as well as geopolitical shifts on a global scale. I am particularly interested in the relatively new global visibility of K-beauty, its surrounding discourses, and how these may generate and shape understandings of Korean American femininity.

In this chapter, I focus explicitly on the ways that Korean American K-beauty entrepreneurs similarly invoke affective memories of family, ritual, and home in order to authenticate their positionality as experts of Korean beauty practices, trends, and products. A common theme in such nostalgic memories is the recollection of sensorial experience, which sets up a cultural credibility that K-beauty entrepreneurs repackage as expertise. The analyses show that sensorial participation in the past, which is embedded in K-beauty narratives, establish affective links implicating the gendered individual, family, and nation. For the analysis, I engage the linguistic anthropological theorization of qualia, or indexes of sensual qualities and feelings (Chumley and Harkness 2013; Harkness 2015, 2021). Pragmatically, qualia direct attention to the “feeling of doing” (Harkness 2015: 574), evidenced in the data through descriptions of sensorial experience. Such descriptions elucidate how gendered socialization occurs for K-beauty entrepreneurs, authenticating the specialized knowledge required to sell products effectively.

As Korean Americans take on the role of cultural mediators, they capitalize on existing essentializing discourses of Asian femininity while generating new ones. How might qualic descriptions of sensorial experience – embedded within narratives/discourses –

connect to the qualia of feeling, or affect more broadly, especially as it pertains to racialized femininity? A new social visibility potentiated by the commercial success of a now-global industry may generate affective resonances for the always-already invisible yellow woman (Cheng 2019). What is the potential insidiousness of such visibility? The broader political project of this chapter, then, is to examine transnational K-beauty's implications for racialized feminine ontology. In other words, how might contemporary commercial visibility contribute to ontological mutability vis-à-vis the Korean woman, and what are the perils of such recognition?

Methodologically, this chapter incorporates ethnography, textual analysis of a website, and discourse analysis of a beauty podcast. The ethnographic work is based on my own participant-observation as a consumer of K-beauty products, videos, and trends, including attending online webinars and events, and reviewing beauty products for companies. My social networks include friends and family members whose participation in K-beauty varies from consuming products regularly and keeping up with trends online, to selling and distributing K-beauty products. Much of the analysis in this chapter focuses on the discourse of Korean American entrepreneurs who are largely credited with popularizing K-beauty in the US, especially via online networks and savvy marketing.

#### *Korean skin care and rapid trends*

Globally, skin care is becoming increasingly influenced by and synonymous with K-beauty, an umbrella term that encompasses South Korean skin care and makeup. The K-beauty industry has expanded exponentially in the last two decades. In 2017, South Korea was the third largest exporter in the international trade in cosmetics – an industry then valued at \$13 billion – exporting \$4.9 billion in beauty products the following year (Calle, Jiménez, and



Valegas 2019). Exports to the United States alone increased by 389% from 2013 to 2017 (Nguyen, Masub, and Jagdeo 2020). Global beauty brands like Estée Lauder have been investing in Korean companies, which in turn have an express interest in the American market, which represents the largest cosmetics market in the world (Kim 2016).

The average growth rate of the South Korean cosmetics market was about 11% for the 1998–2003 period, much higher than the average growth rate of the global market of two percent (Oh and Rugman 2007). Park (2015) finds a correlation between the explosive exportation of Korean cosmetics and that of other popular exports associated with the Korean Wave. In fact, while many domestic industries were severely affected by the financial crisis of 2008, and hence recorded no growth at all in 2009, the Korean cosmetics market grew by as much as 11.8% in the same year (Park 2015).

#### *The emergence of consumer nationalism in South Korea*

What might account for such explosive growth in the South Korean cosmetics market? Laura Nelson, in her seminal work on the patterns of gendered consumerism in South Korea in the 1980s and especially 1990s, details the rise of “consumer nationalism,” a consumerist ideology informed by governmental discourses which tied national identity and wellbeing to everyday consumerist choices. The emergence of this discourse in the 1990s facilitated a national identity by denying ephemeral pleasure in the present through frugality in order to invest in a brighter, collectively imagined future of economic security. Accordingly to Nelson, Korea’s past, marred by foreign invasions and colonialism, does not provide a uniformly positive image, while consumption does, by potentiating the future of a reunified Korea and a successful national economy. Put differently, consumption in South Korea is nationalistic in a way that historical nostalgia cannot be. Women played crucial roles, acting

as the primary consumers whose everyday purchases were weighed against nationalist discourses of what would most benefit the Korean economy. It becomes crucial, then, to understand the intimate ways that nationalist discourse and consumer choices become inextricably tied in the popular Korean imagination of the eighties and nineties.

K-beauty, while primarily associated with skin care, increasingly blurs the line between aesthetics, science, and medicine. For instance, Korea's oldest and leading cosmetics manufacturer, Amore Pacific Corporation, established a bioscience research and development center in 2011; LG Household and Health Care, the number two cosmetics company, formed a technology partnership with a women's hospital, Cha Medical Center, on stem cell research (Kang 2012). With the increased globalization of the Korean beauty market, discourses resonant with consumer nationalism arise, such as medical nationalism, where Korean cosmetic surgeons express pride in their ability to contribute to the economic and reputational success of South Korea on a world stage through cosmetic surgery tourism (Holliday, Cheung, Cho, and Bell 2017).

Technological innovation must, however, strike a balance with perceived authenticity tied to tradition and history. A recent study about consumer choices found that international consumers' perception of Korean cosmetic products as authentic (defined here as incorporating traditional ingredients and production processes) led to higher perceptions of quality as well as intent to purchase (Lee, Sung, Phau, and Lim 2019). The communication of authenticity relies greatly on packaging and promotion, which often make overt references to Korean tradition or history. According to this study, consumers also sought products which were marketed as including ostensibly traditional elements as well as enhanced by modern technological innovation.

This combination of tradition/past with innovation/futurity lends itself to techno-Orientalist projections, which imagines Asia(ns) in “hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse” (Roh, Huang, and Niu 2015: 2). Techno-Orientalism entails paradoxical images and discourses “constructed by the East and West alike, of an ‘Orient’ undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations” (Roh et al. 2015: 3). Thus, in the (white) West’s characterizations of K-beauty, South Korea becomes a signifier of futurity, aspirational but staunchly traditional. As is the case for Japanese techno-Orientalist imaginations (Cheng 2019; Sato 2004), I am suggesting that South Korea’s emergent global hegemony in the realm of beauty as well as the West’s positioning of South Korea as innovative yet necessarily foreign are a crucial backdrop to understanding the intermediary role discursively created and subsequently filled by Korean American entrepreneurs.

*“Look to the east”*: *The (over)determination of Koreans as leaders in the beauty industry*

Techno-Orientalist discourses abound in descriptions of K-beauty: from its “gentle nature-meets-technology ethos” (Steventon 2017) to the “Asian-ification” of the global beauty industry, a term used to characterize the recent growth of domestic cosmetics markets in China, Japan, and South Korea and their subsequent influence on innovation in the global beauty market (Chitrakorn 2015). Western beauty industry actors openly laud K-beauty’s so-called traditional recipes and ingredients, indexical of longstanding cultural conventions and history, as well as its advanced technological innovation. K-beauty vacillates between being of the past and provocatively futuristic, but always exotic.

One popular discourse in K-beauty positions Koreans as necessarily different and singular in their pursuit of beauty, a compulsion that does not mark their (imagined) Western

counterparts. For instance, the authors of *About Face*, a popular beauty guidebook, urge their readers, “Look to the east. Koreans are simply crazy about make-up and cosmetics...No one except extreme skincare junkies is going to go in for those long, elaborate routines. It’s not that we’re lazy in the West; it’s just not part of our culture as it is in Korea” (McDermott and Kennedy 2015: 15). *The east. Koreans. Crazy. Extreme skincare junkies.* Never mind the baffling collapse of difference that is endemic to Orientalizing logics. Note the fractal recursivity at work here: the east as opposed to the west, Koreans with their long, elaborate routines versus the West, “our” culture and “as it is in Korea.” Such discourses about Koreans – by implicature, all Koreans, and indexically Koreanness – as crazed, diligent (“those long, elaborate routines”), necessarily Other (“the east”), but also simultaneously grammatical object of aspiration (“Look to the east”) reproduce broader model minority logics of erasure, difference, and singular pursuit of neoliberal advancement.

The transnationalization of Korean beauty practices complicates such essentializing discourses about Koreans that position them against so called Westerners. As products and practices travel, women of various national and ethnoracial backgrounds embrace Korean beauty practices, despite the “long, elaborate routines.” Moreover, on the Internet – the primary mode of travel for K-beauty discourses – diasporic Koreans frequently position themselves as cultural mediators and possessors of ancestral knowledge. K-beauty entrepreneurs perform their expertise through embodied and linguistic practice on various media platforms, often overdetermining their own cultural legibility in order to perform expertise and to socialize consumers to the proper ways of doing K-beauty.

#### *Korean beauty entrepreneurs as cultural mediators*

In light of dominant characterizations of K-beauty, the following analyses illustrate how

Korean American beauty entrepreneurs invoke nostalgic memories to construct expertise which informs their ability to effectively sell K-beauty. The analyses focus on the following figures: Charlotte Cho of the K-beauty brands Soko Glam and Then I Met You; and Christine Chang and Sarah Lee, co-founders of the US-based K-beauty brand, Glow Recipe.

Cho is a US-born Korean American who founded Soko Glam in 2012, a K-beauty company that curates and sells Korean cosmetics online. She is also the author of *The Little Book of Skin Care: Korean Beauty Secrets for Healthy, Glowing Skin* (2015) and *The Little Book of Jeong: The Korean Art of Building Deep Connections - and How it Changed My Life* (2021) and has been featured in numerous articles, interviews, and YouTube videos as an expert on Korean skin care in the US and is often credited with popularizing the notorious multi-step Korean skin care regimen in the US. In 2018, she launched her own K-beauty line of products called Then I Met You.

For many K-beauty brands, the qualia of feeling, or affect, acts as a crucial link between the flesh of the consumer and the lifestyle promised by K-beauty. Affective displays are frequently found in the ostentatious inspiration or ‘story’ of a company. In the ‘Our Story’ section of Cho’s website for her skincare brand, Then I Met You, a first-person narrative greets the reader alongside a photo of Cho (*Our Story* 2018).



## Meet our founder Charlotte Cho

There are two things I learned while I was in Korea.

One was how to take care of my skin, and the second was the feeling of jeong, a deep and emotional connection. After 5 years in Seoul, I had developed jeong for Korea, my family away from family, and my skin - and I couldn't wait to share what I had learned.

For 6 years thereafter, I spent every day and night curating products, talking to thousands of customers, and collaborating with my favorites lines for Soko Glam - and I treasured every second of it.

Then I Met You represents a new turning point in your life. I was inspired to go deeper in my quest to make the most efficacious, transformative products for your routine, with the ingredients and experience I know matter. With jeong infused in every aspect of Then I Met You, my hope is that it will truly transform the way you feel and how you live.

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Cho's authorial voice locates the story of her newest entrepreneurial pursuit, and by extension, her positionality and credibility, in South Korea. By setting up the retrospective

narrative with “two things I learned,” the paragraph invokes a genre that signals to interlocutors that such lessons ought to be takeaways for the reader. In the second paragraph, by syntactically following the lesson of “how to take care of my skin” with *jeong*, she links product and practice to feeling and connection. This affective link between Cho’s journey into skincare and emotional connections rooted in Korea are further instantiated by her invocation of family, a trope woven throughout the description. By developing a *jeong* for “Korea, my family away from family, and my skin,” Cho positions herself as a kind of authenticated caregiver. Nation, family, and skin care are intimately intertwined by her deep commitment to them via *jeong*. In the final paragraph, *jeong* returns in resignified form as an ingredient in each product of her very own Then I Met You line (‘with jeong infused’) as skin care transcends superficial personal practice. Cho’s infusion of *jeong* in each product personalizes the consumer relationship to product and to brand. Cho’s expressed desire for her products to “truly transform the way you feel and how you live” is also a promise: this new venture seeks to do just that.

Cho declares that she “couldn’t wait to share what [she] had learned,” suggesting the information gleaned from her time in Korea was too good to hold onto for herself. South Korea is discursively constructed as the originating point, the land of a specialized kind of knowledge, access to which is currently limited in the US (indexically, the West) where Cho grew up. She takes on the role of an ambassador, making it her duty to share such information: the third paragraph paints a picture of a hardworking Cho (“for 6 years...I spent every day and night”) who consulted with “thousands of customers” and collaborated with several companies to bring about Soko Glam. Her authorial voice is altruistic, corroborated by the claim that she “treasured every second of it.”

In the final paragraph, her new skincare line, Then I Met You, is framed as a “turning point” for the reader, once again signifying Cho’s altruistic motives of having the consumer in mind. The name of her company also indexes a decisive and highly personal moment between two people. The line of products was inspired by Cho’s desire “to go deeper” with “you,” the consumer, in mind. The notion of going deeper has multiple valences, harkening back to Cho’s diligence in researching and working behind-the-scenes, as well as an intimate and profound affective experience with and for consumers. Indeed, at numerous live appearances, Cho refers to consumers of her products as a “community.”

At a recent live event to promote the newest product of the Then I Met You line, a chemical peel, Cho described the inspiration behind the product in the following terms: “I did marry the Western style skin care with the Korean philosophy of skin care which is more about maintenance and hydration.” Cho positions herself as an expert of both the “Western style” and the “Korean philosophy” of skin care, which are juxtaposed as inherently different – or different enough – that an intermediary is required to “marry” the two. Such discourses are not uncommon in marketing strategies whereby a gap is discursively constructed in order to provide a justification for a new product. By pitting the Western against the Korean, Cho’s description of her product engages a techno-Orientalist projection where K-beauty, as a blend of the two, emerges as the real innovation.

#### *Familial memories and socialization in K-beauty*

The following transcript comes from an episode of The Allure podcast associated with the beauty and fashion magazine of the same name and is hosted by its editor-in-chief Michelle Lee. The episode is entitled “The Glow Recipe Founders on the Evolution and Future of K-beauty,” and features Christine Chang and Sarah Lee, co-founders of the US-based K-beauty



brand, Glow Recipe. At the beginning of the episode, Sarah Lee explains how part of their motivation to pursue a K-beauty brand in the US was due to the fact that both she and Chang are “bilingual and bicultural,” authenticating their positionalities as K-beauty experts in the US context, much like Cho’s ability to marry the Western with the Korean. The host asks about their childhood experiences with skin care in the Korean context.

Transcript #1 [00:05:19.988 - 07:21.600]

1 MICHELLE; Okay.  
2 going back to childhood,  
3 also,  
4 I know that,  
5 in Kore:a,  
6 people just have a different,  
7 outlook.  
8 on what beauty is,  
9 and especially skincare.  
10 SARAH; Yeah.  
11 MICHELLE; Can you both talk about,  
12 living in Korea,  
13 when you were younger,  
14 how did that inform,  
15 who you are now,  
16 and how you treat your skin.  
17 Is it truly that,  
18 are kids at a very young age,  
19 learning about skincare?  
20 CHRISTINE; yeah absolutely.  
21 I—  
22 one of my earliest memories,  
23 of my mother doing skincare?  
24 is,  
25 she had had a:,  
26 long da:y,  
27 so she came home,  
28 she took out some yogurt,  
29 honey,  
30 green tea powder,  
31 Job's tears powder,  
32 mixed it all up,

33 and just did a DIY face m[ask.  
 34 MICHELLE; [wait,  
 35 what's] Job's tears powder?  
 36 CHRISTINE; A:and],  
 37 It's like a:—  
 38 I guess a type of grain?  
 39 People u—  
 40 drink it.  
 41 a lot [for health]ful,  
 42 MICHELLE; [Hu:h]?  
 43 CHRISTINE; purposes?  
 44 SARAH; Good for sore throat.  
 45 [@]  
 46 MICHELLE; [Hm].  
 47 CHRISTINE; Yes.  
 48 @A:nd,  
 49 she would,  
 50 put,  
 51 the mask on her face.  
 52 And then she would give me a dollop too.  
 53 And we would mask together,  
 54 and talk,  
 55 and it's just such a positive,  
 56 kind of,  
 57 self-care experience,  
 58 that we would,  
 59 do together.  
 60 A:nd,  
 61 she was just very passionate about her skincare routine,  
 62 but it was never a chore.  
 63 MICHELLE; Yup.  
 64 CHRISTINE; And I remember that,  
 65 attitude towards skincare.  
 66 I think that's what affected me the most.  
 67 MICHELLE; Yeah.  
 68 SARAH; Yeah,  
 69 same here.  
 70 I mean,  
 71 I watched,  
 72 even as a,  
 73 very very young child.  
 74 every night,  
 75 my mom just sitting at her vanity.

76 with,  
77 her,  
78 few steps of skincare,  
79 but really,  
80 <SMILE> patting it all in?  
81 and I remember that sound,  
82 very distinctively.  
83 I would know,  
84 that that's when my mom is going,  
85 into that mode,  
86 of like,  
87 self-care,  
88 and like,  
89 he:r,  
90 me time? </>  
91 And I watched her pat in skincare,  
92 all the way to the neck,  
93 and décolleté,  
94 and that was,  
95 really interesting to me.  
96 And I watched it every single night.  
97 And I think,  
98 naturally,  
99 she also wanted to involve me in skincare.  
100 So we did a lot of DIY,  
101 like Christine was saying.  
102 we did,  
103 cucumber masking,  
104 to brighten skin.  
105 we actually,  
106 um,  
107 use watermelon leftovers?  
108 after eating the fruit?  
109 and put them in bottles,  
110 to spritz it on our face as toners,  
111 and then we would go to public bath houses,  
112 with our grandmother actually.  
113 every weekend.  
114 and then we would splash milk,  
115 'cause it really helps to brighten,

116 strengthen the skin barrier?  
 117 and sometimes,  
 118 get the <SMILE> scrubbing.  
 119 I'm sure you've expe[rienced,  
 120 it in Kor]ean spas.</>  
 121 MICHELLE; [Yup.  
 122 Oh yeah].  
 123 It's very intense.  
 124 SARAH; It's very intense,  
 125 but it was a regular,  
 126 routine for us.

The host's question sets up a particular response by asking Sarah and Christine to locate their answers temporally in childhood and spatially in South Korea. Christine's response establishes her current K-beauty expertise in lived experiences tied to nostalgic memories of family members, and especially her mother. The sharing of "one of my earliest memories" (line 22) has a primordial quality, suggesting that K-beauty practices have a long history which precedes her. The strategy of invoking not just memories, but early ones, sets up a particular kind of experience that has been accrued over a lifetime. This accrual results in not only a gendered embodied habitus (a point I return to below), but also a longstanding access to cultural practices that K-beauty entrepreneurs mark explicitly. In this way, they invoke an essentialized Koreanness that is located spatially and temporally in the remote past.

Christine proceeds to share a memory from her childhood, which evidences a routinized socialization process. She recalls a day in which her mother "had had a long day" (lines 25-26), and by way of reprieve, proceeds to do a DIY mask at home. The mother's use of everyday food items simultaneously indexes frugality and specialized knowledge about the skincare benefits of each food item. Christine's ability to recall and enumerate each ingredient suggests a recurring event, one that she has successfully memorized. Although

Christine has no way of knowing for sure (presumably as a young child) whether or not her mother, indeed, “had had a long day,” this clause provides the causal conditions for a relaxing, at-home experience whereby the domestic sphere is converted into a relaxing space. Furthermore, locating her memory in the remote past, Christine contextualizes her present speech event (i.e., a K-beauty interview) and semiotically her present expertise with a nostalgic memory of her Korean mother.

Christine’s extended description of her mother’s beauty practices positions her as a key figure in the young Christine’s K-beauty socialization. Christine retells how her mother would include her as well by “giv[ing] me a dollop too” (line 52). The mother’s inclusion of her daughter transforms the solo act of masking into a social(izing) event where mother and daughter talk (line 54) and mask together, to which Christine aligns with an overtly positive stance (line 55). She claims that for her mother, skin care “was never a chore” (line 62), but rather an act of “self-care” (line 57). This juxtaposition of her Korean mother’s approach to skin care as self-care, itself a neoliberal marketing buzzword indexical of wellness (Roh 2020), as opposed to a chore, echoes popular East-West dichotomies of approaches to beauty in broader discussions of K-beauty (as exemplified by the McDermott and Kennedy quote above). Indeed, within the context of this podcast episode, Christine and Sarah frequently remind listeners that K-beauty is a holistic approach, or philosophy (reminiscent of Cho’s characterization of K-beauty).

When Sarah chimes in to answer the same question about childhood memories, she also describes watching her mother as a “very very young child” (line 73). Like Christine, her invocation of memories from an early time semiotically functions to authenticate her bicultural positionality and expertise. She recalls observing her mother sitting at her vanity

night after night (lines 74-75, line 96), an established routine that presumably helped socialize Sarah into skin care, given the context in which the memory is being shared. Like Christine, Sarah constructs the diegetic memory as one that begins with the central mother figure who includes her daughter in a dyadic self-care routine. The active sensorial verbs of watching (line 71) and hearing her mother's patting of the face (line 80) consistently ("every single night," line 96, also line 74) describe a beauty socialization process whereby the young Sarah goes from observer to active participant (line 99).

Her description of her mother's desire to include her in skin care as *natural* (line 98) leaves femininity unmarked and normalizes such mother-daughter (i.e. feminine) beauty socialization practices. Sarah recalls another figure, her grandmother (line 112), who narratively re-appears throughout the podcast. Besides lexically encoded gender to refer to female family members, gender is not oriented to overtly in either Christine's or Sarah's responses of childhood memories. This lack of overt mention of gender functions to normalize beauty practices as feminine and also indexically maps the maintenance of beauty onto gender roles; that is, as the realm and the generational work of matriarchs. The exclusive mention of women as key figures in Christine and Sarah's socialization into Korean beauty norms and practices suggests a properly gendered habitus, both in terms of the young girl who learns the proper ways of K-beauty through consistent exposure and the woman whose authenticated cultural fluency and expertise can be used as social capital.

*The qualia of patting: Sensoriality and socialization*

The memory of routinely observing her mother's beauty regimen sets up a multisensorial event that results in socializing the young Sarah whose detailed description of her mother's nightly ritual sets up a vivid image of a young girl curiously observing her mother sitting in

front of her vanity. She recalls visually observing her mother (line 71, 91, 96) engage in the tactile act of patting, which produces a sound that the adult Sarah remembers vividly (“I remember that sound very distinctively,” line 81-82). Sarah's overt commentary on "that sound" refers to specific aural and haptic qualia that are intimately linked to her mother's transition to a “mode of self-care” (lines 85-86). Sarah's voice shifts to a smiling voice quality as she describes her mother's nightly ritual of gently patting products onto her face (lines 80-90). This voice quality indexes a nostalgic pleasure that is produced and re-lived at the moment of recalling the memory of ritual patting – described as a tactile, sonic, visual experience.

The reflexivity inherent in Sarah's metadiscursive telling of the memory and emphasis on the sounds produced within the memory encourage an intent focus on the very act of patting, itself a highly mimetic activity frequently discussed in K-beauty practices. Sarah's performative retelling of her mother's beauty practices functions to decontextualize the patting from within the diegetic confines of the memory and recontextualizes the embodied act in the present conversation about K-beauty in the US. In other words, her reflexive discourse renders ritual patting extractable, encouraging a process of entextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990), whereby listeners of the Allure podcast can engage the multisensorial experience of patting through Sarah's retelling. In sum, patting, which in this case originates in Sarah's memory of her Korean mother's beauty practices, gets repackaged in the act of recollection during the podcast interview, encouraging listeners to emulate ritual patting in their own beauty practices.

*Selling the senses: The qualia of expertise*

In the retelling of memories of family, beauty secrets, and practices, Christine and Sarah use

sensorial verbs and descriptors that echo marketing buzzwords. Such discursive strategies of embedding childhood memories with sensorial language demonstrate a specialized knowledge of natural ingredients, thereby creating links to tradition, in order to perform K-beauty expertise. Sarah exclaims that “we did a lot of DIY” (line 100), again invoking the domestic sphere like Christine’s mother’s everyday food items used for masking. The indexical associations with DIY in this context include frugality and consumer choices made by matriarchs. Sarah describes each food item and its specific purpose: “cucumber making to brighten skin” (lines 103-104), “watermelon leftovers...to spritz” (lines 107-110), and “splash[ing] milk...to brighten, strengthen the skin barrier” (lines 114-116). Enumerating each of the ingredients with their efficacious qualities suggests her matriarchs knew exactly what the effect and purpose of each ingredient was, acting as precursors to what would become K-beauty products. Lee, by extension, has become the arbiter of such ancestral knowledge.

Christine and Sarah’s overt references to a specific food item, watermelon, returns in a later segment where the host asks about the inspiration for their products in their Glow Recipe line. Sarah, speaking for herself and Christine, shares a childhood memory of their grandmas rubbing watermelon on their backs to treat heat rashes (line 10-11).

Transcript #2 [16:12.212 – 16:51.769]

1 SARAH; Oh I love that.  
2 Yeah,  
3 so watermelon,  
4 is,  
5 the first OG fruit,  
6 that we introduced in our ra:nge.  
7 A:nd,  
8 the original,  
9 inspiration was that,  
10 we both grew up with our grandmothers,



11 rubbing watermelon rind on our backs.  
12 Especially when we had,  
13 heat rashes,  
14 or irritation over,  
15 hot summer months,  
16 in Korea.  
17 And it's actually a,  
18 pretty common,  
19 and @popular,  
20 ritual?  
21 in Korea?  
22 So we kind of like,  
23 joked about it,  
24 and we were thinking,  
25 oh my god.  
26 why aren't we using this,  
27 for everybody else?  
28 because,  
29 we love to eat it.  
30 everyone @loves the fruit.  
31 and so we dug into it a little bit deeper,  
32 and we learned that,  
33 it is one of the most,  
34 powerfully,  
35 antioxidant-rich fruits,  
36 out there.  
37 It is super hydrating.  
38 But it-  
39 It's also packed with amino acid vitamins.  
40 And it's very soothing.  
41 And it does wonders for all types of skin actually.  
42 A:nd,  
43 Actually,  
44 it gives hydration a very lightweight form.  
45 So we wanted to maximize the fruit,  
46 as much as possible.  
47 which is why we added,  
48 over fifty percent of watermelon extract  
49 And actual fresh fruit,  
50 in the entire formula.

Lee describes the rubbing of watermelon rinds as a “pretty common and popular ritual in South Korea” (lines 17-21). Lee and Chang’s shared memory of childhood interactions with their respective grandmothers becomes a proxy for all Korean childhoods and the inspiration for their first product. The question, “why aren’t we using this for everybody else?” (lines 26-27) suggests an insight or discovery – the untapped potential of watermelon, as used in Korea – as a beauty ingredient for the rest of the world. The shifting referent for *we* in lines 22-32 functions to call in different forms of membership, often referring to Sarah and Christine (lines 22, 24, 26), but sometimes used to appeal to common sense, a universalizing tactic meant to include everyone, as in line 29. Line 32 marks a clear shift in prosody: the prior lines feature a smiling voice quality (line 19) and numerous instances of rising intonation.

When Sarah divulges what she and Christine learned upon researching the benefits of watermelon, her prosody becomes affectless, a more authoritative voice performing commercial expertise by delivering ostensibly factual information about an efficacious ingredient. She also uses marketing buzzwords and phrases like “antioxidant-rich” (line 35), “hydrating” (line 37), “packed with amino acid vitamins” (line 39), claiming that “it does wonders for all types of skin” (line 41). She also uses qualic descriptors like “soothing” (line 40), “lightweight” (line 44), and “fresh” (line 49). By intimating nostalgic memories and constructing practices as unmistakably Korean, Christine and Sarah appeal to tradition by taking an ingredient from their childhood – a “recipe” handed down from grandma – and modify it for their Glow Recipe line, offering an innovation on tradition.

*Racialized gender and the biopolitical effects of K-beauty*

As Korean Americans take on the role of cultural mediators, they literally and discursively move back and forth from South Korea and the US, a mediation which necessitates a translation fraught with overdetermined notions of racialized beauty and femininity. Nostalgic family memories act as authenticating cultural experiences which effectively sell tradition. The sensorial experiences embedded in these memories are also promises of a socialization extended to the K-beauty consumer. In the performance of expertise, techno-Orientalist discourses also prove to be an effective K-beauty marketing strategy. Korean Americans divulge family secrets of DIY, home ingredients, a specialized cultural knowledge that is supplemented by research, technology, and innovation. Korean Americans' nostalgic memories and gendered embodied habitus are their literal racial capital in the selling of K-beauty. As Cho (2015:17) writes in her beauty book *The Little Book of Skin Care*, "Living in Korea made me really believe in the people: I thought Korea had so much to offer the rest of the world, and I wanted to share it." Such missionizing pronouncements link culture, nation, innovation, and beauty as a globalizing project.

I am left wondering about the subtle ways that intimate memories are marketed, and gendered exoticism rendered palatable to a white perceiving subject. At the beginning of the Allure podcast analyzed above, Christine Chang and Sarah Lee ardently reject the ways that K-beauty has been "exoticized" when some focus on "weird ingredients," but insist on viewing K-beauty as a "philosophy." Indeed, in addition to a philosophy, K-beauty is frequently branded as a lifestyle, a mindset, and holistic approach. For instance, Charlotte Cho (2015:ix) explains to her readers that Korean skin care is "not just about the products on your bathroom shelf, but a mindset that permeates your lifestyle, from the food you eat to the clothes you wear." She rejects the notion that skin care is merely topical, reducible to a few products. Skin

care is also about attitude, nutrition, style. Consumerism is packaged as physical and psychological wellbeing that penetrates all facets of life. This is ontological saturation. If prescriptive notions of skin care inform not just being and living, but living *well*, who gets to partake in the promises of K-beauty?

Entrepreneurs adamantly refuse vanity or superficial motives in K-beauty, which instead, is frequently packaged as self-care (which was also evident in the data above). The branding of skin care as self-care points to the ways that K-beauty is already mired in the neoliberalization of health discourses and its biopolitical effects. The one who makes time for Korean skin care is a particular kind of physical and social being. As Cho (2015:136) explains, Korean culture cares a lot about doing and being your best.” The discursive construction of neoliberal aspirations is all-too-familiar in the US context vis-à-vis Asian-raced subjects. As racialized Asian bodies are historically charged with discourses of grotesque, deviant, and diseased corporeality that render them unassimilable and threatening, the ways in which racialized gender is made legible and consumable through K-beauty is reminiscent of model minority discourses. Writing about the Asian family unit as model minority, erin Khuê Ninh (2014:171) argues, “What the Asian immigrant family does, however, is to demonstrate that intimate caretaking in the face of inequality and deprivation can be the most hypernormative, neoliberal act of all.”

K-beauty is also a conspicuously gendered enterprise. Korean American women’s gendered labor fits too easily into model minority logics, contributing to a racial gendering of Asian women that can seemingly compete with hegemonic norms under the guise of newness and even supposedly changing beauty norms. As entrepreneurs take on this labor in the pursuit of profit, what anxieties and everyday violences are masked by skin care under the

guise of self-care? The promises of K-beauty are so enticing for those craving subjectivity. As I opened this chapter, I ask again, what are the perils of recognition? While my final comments are mere gestures, I add one more question to the project of imagining otherwise (Chuh 2003): What are some alternative ways of mattering that refuse the pitfalls of racial capitalism? Returning to my vignette, I experienced pleasure and no small measure of pride in recalling the memory of my mother and our weekly trips to that tiny store. But that memory also reminds of a palpable adult grief that I have yet to fully articulate.

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## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### *The precariousness of academic life*

In March 2020, as numerous places of work shut down, Internet traffic intensified and technologically mediated communication became the primary form of human interaction for many. The Internet went from a technological tool to a crucial form of networking overnight, and it allowed many in the academy to continue our livelihood. COVID-induced shutdowns also exposed the urgently material and social inequities of the academy, including hidden essential workers such as staff members and contingent labor, who had little choice but to continue “business as usual,” despite the drastic shift in human spatial sociality and the eerie unknown of a highly infectious disease. These shifts also exposed the starkly differential access of students to equipment and reliable wireless connections and hence, their primary modes of learning. Virtual mediation, revealed the physical and embodied limitations of human interaction online as more and more folks reported “Zoom fatigue” and persistent headaches. Differentiated embodied experiences also flagged the continuation of the academy’s unstable infrastructures, including the profoundly ableist and racist undercurrents of a one-size-fits-all expectations of productivity.

At numerous points during 2020 and 2021, academic inquiry – and, for me, this project in particular – felt indulgent, inconsequential, and even unethical in the face of relentless, often public, casualties, and the multiple overlapping crises exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ephemeral but sharp moments of ambivalence I have felt towards this project are a reflection of my feelings towards the academy, which were not born overnight and certainly did not originate with my dissertation. Nonetheless, I also experienced moments of sheer joy in making surprising connections across texts and

witnessing the growth in my own thinking – not despite, but as a result of my physical distance from the academy. By way of conclusion, I briefly summarize the core themes and theoretical interventions of this work, but I spend most of the chapter reflecting on my graduate training in linguistics, interdisciplinary work, and how external engagement might inform the future of linguistics.

As a way of organizing my discussion, I am thinking of the politics of this work as it pertains to different scales of bodies: the moving and feeling human bodies in my research, linguistics as a field in the larger body of the academy, and my own embodied knowledge of trauma navigating academic spaces, which informs my critiques of academia's failure to be a just and equitable space, especially for minoritized scholars. I offer short vignettes throughout this chapter which illuminate these sharp moments of embodied feeling. In asserting my own subjectivity here, I refuse a scholarship that sharply delineates cognition and affect and which seeks to remain aloof or objective. Instead, as numerous feminist and queer theorists have argued, affects which are read as stoic or passive – and hence more rational or objective – are frequently prioritized in the academy (Ahmed 2000, 2004; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Sedgwick 2003; Spelman 1988). Emotional interactions and investments are inextricably linked to the everyday praxis of being a graduate student (Rys 2017) and often go hand-in-hand with the development of critical consciousness (Boggs and Boggs 1974). Hence, by marking my own affective responses, I treat them as instructive moments which have catalyzed a stronger articulation for what I seek for my academic work to do. I also frequently invoke a 'we' that is both fraught and limited. This slippage is intentional in that I hope my loving critique of the discipline of my training contributes to ongoing conversations about greater justice in linguistics.

*Moving, feeling bodies*

This dissertation has focused on localized performances and processes of meaning making through the subjective interventions of the body as it interacts with globalized Korean products. A central premise of this work has been that online worlds are often experienced as profoundly embodied. While worldmaking certainly happens online, this project has been much more interested in the interstitial spaces between what is online and offline, embodied and disembodied, and mediations of affect throughout such performances. Throughout the chapters, I treated language as one component of a much more complex system of meaning involving multiple senses and modalities, proposing a multisensorial semiotics that extends to virtual spaces. This approach to the study of online performance calls for an explicit attention to the co-presence and interaction of embodiment, affect, and discourse.

My dissertation highlights the ways that linguistic practice is often mediated by embodiment, thereby including language under the broader umbrella of an embodied semiotics. This project also examined different scales and types of feeling, from embodied sensorial experience (such as in mukbang and K-beauty) to the affective feelings of belonging produced by Mexican K-pop fan practices discussed in Chapter 2. I also argued that affects contribute to feelings of being (as in K-pop dancers' phenomenological approximation to femininity) as much as belonging. In Chapter 4 on K-beauty, I suggested that embodied sensorial feelings which invoke nostalgia might inform a way of performing Korean American femininity that potentiates affective resonance at the scale of dispersed ontology. Future work needs to further develop these scales of feelings from the qualia of sensory experience to those of affect and ontology.

This work also centered the body in performance that may at first appear disembodied or lacking in overt physicality. By attending to race and gender and their differential transnational interpretations, my work seeks to contribute to an intersectional linguistics (Lanehart 2009; miles-hercules 2020). This work is informed by feminist insights that cognition, bodily sensation, and feeling are not mutually exclusive (Ahmed 2004). While race and gender remain consequential in digitized spaces (Nakamura 2007), their meanings may shift based on viewership, genre, and technological affordances. Finally, attention to the virtual body has consequences for the theorization of sociocultural linguistic concepts like indexicality and interdiscursivity by problematizing understandings of deixis and discourse that rely on face-to-face data.

*“How is this linguistics?” and other fraught questions in the discipline*

Many linguists may be left unconvinced of the need to pay attention to the central themes of my dissertation: affect, embodiment, materiality, transnational race and gender, semiotic approaches to the study of language. Some may ask (and, indeed, have asked): “How is this linguistics?” In the sections that follow, I ruminate on this question which has haunted me throughout my graduate career, and which, I will argue, is a rhetorical device which keeps many minoritized scholars out of linguistics. By calling this a “fraught” question, I am suggesting that this formulation indexes a certain anxiety on the part of gatekeepers and causes anxiety for nascent and potential linguists. Instead of defending linguistics, I ask: what is it we are trying to defend? By situating linguistics in broader scholarly discussions on interdisciplinarity and the inherent limitations of the neoliberal university, I argue that what is needed is a drastic reimagining of linguistics as a discipline.

Before my own training in a linguistics program began, I had decided, in no uncertain terms, to leave academia as I no longer saw the academic enterprise as a viable future of sustenance for myself and my loved ones. When I reluctantly returned, largely due to the intervention of mentors, I vacillated between looking to the field of linguistics to validate my professional identity and spending my days furtively avoiding spaces frequented by “real linguists” focusing on structural linguistics subfields. “Your experience is not singular, although it may feel sharply unique at the time,” a faculty mentor assured me. He explained that painful events and toxic relationships might feel extremely individualized, but with time, I would come to see these as deeply structural.

It is difficult to reconcile the fact that the statement “Your work is so incredibly interdisciplinary and exciting” is uttered by those in the same discipline as the ones who warned me with such certainty, “That topic will never get you a job.” Parochial ideologies of what counts as linguistics may be reproduced even within departments that are at the cutting edge of the field. The distinguished reputation of my own department has not sheltered me or others from some version of the judgment, “This work is not linguistics,” an appraisal that is detrimental to budding scholars and forecloses brilliance from seeing the light of day. Linguistics departments continue to be unwelcoming spaces for students of color, even as increasingly more departments recruit students from historically excluded populations. The academy is obsessed with compositional diversity – visually made manifest by racialized bodies – but fails to protect their students from racist incidents within the very walls of the ivory tower (Calhoun 2021).

My training is undoubtedly in linguistics, but what is one to make of hiring practices and job opportunities? What is the inevitable message that I and so many other junior

scholars internalize when job post after job post asks for a specialized set of tools that reflect the field's broader ideologies of what counts as linguistics, from which we are excluded? I would argue that non-variationist sociolinguistics is stigmatized, and often openly and unapologetically maligned by many linguists. Issues of equity have, for too long, been treated as external to the field of linguistics. Social justice is frequently cited as the realm of sociolinguistics, an ideology that both problematically relegates the work of social justice to a single subfield and erroneously conflates sociolinguistic research with social justice. Of all the linguistic subfields, sociocultural linguistics – including applied linguistics and linguistic anthropology – has been one of the most explicitly concerned with social justice by seeking to uncover ideologies that are entrenched in language use (Avineri, Graham, Johnson, Riner, and Rosa 2018; Bucholtz and Hall 2008; Piller 2016). Still, among many sociolinguists, the preoccupation with scientific 'rigor' and rigid categorization results in oversimplification, as exemplified by the continued and pervasive use of racial and gender categories that reify hegemonic ways of thinking. Race, class, and gender are frequently deployed as discrete categories, pre-given realities that help to explain the more important issue for many sociolinguists: language variation. Settler colonial and racializing ideologies abound (Hill 2002; Leonard 2011, 2017), while whiteness is frequently left unmarked. Linguistics continues to reckon with social – and especially racial – justice (Charity Hudley 2013; Charity Hudley, Mallinson, Bucholtz, Flores, Holliday, Chun, and Spears 2018; Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz 2020) including its inability to provide tangible benefits to the minoritized populations whose language practices inform some of the most foundational theories of the field (Charity Hudley 2013; Meek 2011; Rickford 1997).

*White silence and graduate training in linguistics (or, “We don’t know how to talk about race”)*

The following vignette, originally prepared for a special issue on race and language, discusses my embodied affective experience during a department town hall meeting in spring 2020 to discuss anti-Black violence after the police murder of George Floyd. I write from the perspective of a junior sociocultural linguist and as an Asian American femme scholar. I foreground this positionality in order to highlight and critique the ways I have frequently (often unabashedly) been recruited to partake in anti-Black rhetoric and policies while benefiting from white-supremacist structures, albeit always contingently and precariously. Still, as a woman of color, my physical presence in largely white institutions has readily been tokenized, exoticized, and not infrequently invisibilized.

As I sit in the relative safety of my apartment my whole body is agitated, my face burning. All week I have been inconsolable, vacillating between numbness and a burning rage, unable to grasp work or even the impetus to work. This present Zoom room is stifling as I wait out another painfully long silence that must have lasted but a few seconds. As my eyes scan the scattered blocks of participants’ names and pictures on my screen, I feel a warm frustration build and concentrate heat in my cheeks. I want to throw my laptop, something, but instead I throw my head back, frustrated. *Why is it so hard for people to talk about race?*

I pick up my phone swiftly, almost instinctively, to text my friends to see if they’re alright: responses of frustration. I’m sitting in my third virtual town hall meeting this week dedicated explicitly to anti-Black racism in the academy in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, as the litany goes and goes

and goes. The silence is so palpable it fills my screen and relentlessly smacks me in the face. My department's so-called town hall meeting has turned into the same six people – not the least of which include all of my Black colleagues – having an echo chamber-of-a-conversation in the midst of an ostensibly passive, voyeuristic, largely white group of participants. I thought this virtual space was supposed to foster critical dialogue and some safe communal reprieve for Black colleagues in light of the sharply current yet historically recurring instantiations of anti-Black violence. With each passing second, my rage grows hotter as I realize how naive I was to think this event would spur meaningful discussion. Every moment of silence in this institutionally sanctioned call feels violent.

As my rage morphs into a feeling of helplessness, I feel triangulated between my affective alignment with Black colleagues and my own conspicuously silent condemnation against white silence. Then, abruptly, my stomach sinks as I'm struck by the sharp, shameful realization that I have loyalty to both. Ethically, what is the most responsible thing for me to do? As a friend, as a racial ally, as a femme of color, but also as a graduate student navigating hegemonic norms of “professionalism”? These positionalities index certain loyalties, and I find myself vacillating between my currently muted microphone and the parallel stream of incredibly loud offline texts I share with friends in between our online interjections.

What is causing this intelligent, prolific group of scholars to remain in silence? (Is this even the ‘right’ question? Is this a fair question?). It's the same reticence that my colleagues and I noticed at the Linguistic Society of America's 2019 Summer Institute in courses whenever and wherever race was topically foregrounded. It's a palpable discomfort. It's in physical classrooms, it's in virtual classrooms. It's in linguistics departments. It's in



anthropology departments. Tweet and retweet: Graduate students don't know how to talk about race! Senior scholars don't know how to talk about race! The silence of that town hall meeting is but one example of the broader patterned inability of academics to discuss matters of race, despite the visceral urgency of the moment.

In the aftermath of that town hall meeting, I am left thinking about the scalar ethics of silence and how to move beyond objectifying episodes or isolating instances in order to examine the very relationality and extension of white silence that moves beyond white bodies. White silence is a hegemonic form of silence that works to fortify white supremacy. Put another way, how does a personal ethics of silence connect to institutional mechanisms that not only ratify white silence but actually weaponize it to further silence dissent? White silence has implications for how graduate students receive and make sense of their training, and this socialization, in turn, shapes disciplines that are housed within institutions whose dominant frameworks already function to uphold white supremacy.

As my vignette highlights, and based on my training, my conversations with other linguists, and my experiences at scholarly conferences, I am convinced that few, if any, linguistics departments train scholars to talk explicitly about race, even those who work with racialized speakers. I have been surrounded by politically active graduate student colleagues and mentors in and outside of my department who challenged my thinking and fostered intellectual curiosity in the most generous and generative of ways. I have learned – not just *about* race, but crucially, how to discuss racializing processes – through independent reading groups and late-night discussions with colleagues commiserating over misogyny and microaggressions. Some of my greatest learning has been in interdisciplinary seminars with a critical mass of students of color and from reading outside of my field of training. Indeed,

calls for a greater focus on ethics and social justice within my department have consistently come from students of color.

*On interdisciplinarity and its limitations*

Academia – and especially the humanities and social sciences – has witnessed a profound shift in the concept of “interdisciplinary” work. While it retains a distasteful connotation for some, such work is the only research possible for others. I have clung to the work of linguists and linguistic anthropologists who cross disciplines, and especially those who have a clear articulation of the political work they seek to do through their scholarship. In recent years, the literature on race and language in particular has seen a robust uptake in the field, advancing linguistics and related fields to more clearly articulate a linguistic theory of race (Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz 2020). I am left wondering what hurdles, traumas, and gatekeeping such scholars encountered during their graduate training and what gaslighting and discrediting they have endured throughout their careers.

How does one account for the material effects of time, money, and energy that graduate students spend reading, taking additional courses, and attending conferences and webinars in other disciplines? How do we structurally shift how programs are designed, including time-to-degree constraints for interdisciplinary work? How do we properly compensate for the multifaceted forms of labor such work entails? For linguists doing interdisciplinary work, how many fields must they be legible to and are these solely dictated by the job market? What irreparable damage has been done by the time linguistics students graduate?

Throughout much of my linguistics training, my interest in power, race, gender, and culture – not to mention my own racializing and condescending experiences in the academy –

kept pushing me into other archives of knowledge, especially in ethnic studies and feminist studies. Throughout my PhD in linguistics, I engaged in conscientious defection by attending courses in anthropology, queer studies, and Asian American studies, often unofficially and at other institutions. I also organized reading groups and engaged in student and community advocacy, which exposed me to spaces and communities that challenged me in my ethical, theoretical, and pedagogical maturation. Performing a certain disciplinary promiscuity is certainly not a practice I invented; my mentors did it, discussed their struggles openly, and supported the work I sought to do. However, I frequently felt burnt out, normalizing physical pain and working to the point of psychological and emotional detriment. What's worse, I fostered a sort of identity and pride from being overworked and exhausted.

What does interdisciplinary work even mean for linguistics and what is its purpose? Ethnic studies scholar Kandice Chuh (2021) recently described interdisciplinarity as “such a marketing term now.” Critical ethnic studies scholars have shed light on the ways that ethnic studies and other disciplines historically fought for and defended by minoritized subjects gets institutionalized within the machinist logics of the neoliberal university, and hence, depoliticized (Chuh 2014, Hong 2015; Hong & Ferguson 2011; Ferguson 2011; Reddy 2011). In what ways does interdisciplinarity in linguistics and in the academy still rely on compartmentalized knowledge? Identitarian logics are still pervasive in linguistics as instantiated by its continued reliance on static categories. How might we envision a more expansive linguistics? As Charity Hudley et al. (2020) put it, “Why is your linguistics so small?”

Such scholarship calls attention to the failures and limitations of educational institutions to fully embody just, equitable, and inclusive spaces. My engagement with these

literatures have emboldened me to resist neoliberal valuations of my own work and academic myopia by reminding me of the stakes of intellectual labor. I am reminded of Tomlinson and Lipsitz's (2013:9) call to those working within academic contexts to "know the work we want our work to do." Their challenge urges me to have a stronger articulation of what I want my work to do both in academic and nonacademic contexts. I join these and countless other scholars in continually questioning the state of academia, my own role as scholar and educator, and the ethical implications of doing work in such a context.

Given the insights of such scholarship, I instead suggest that explicitly fostering a deep ambivalence to the very institutions that we inhabit is crucial to moving towards a more racially just academia, if such is our collective aim (Moten and Harney 2004). Performing disciplinary promiscuity has the potential to produce undisciplined subjects within linguistics (both as areas of study and as scholars) by providing the crucial language that linguists need to further racial justice in our field while also contributing to more nuanced analyses in other fields vis-à-vis racialized speaking subjects. Rather than dissolving linguistics as a field, I argue that cross-disciplinary interactions actually reveal how crucial and compelling linguistic insights are to other fields in the humanities and social sciences.

*What would a defensible linguistics look like?*

What can the academy do? What can linguists and linguistic anthropologists do? What can we do as educators and scholars? The rush of academics to scholarly modes of inquiry in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in the midst of an ongoing pandemic was alarming. Such responses induced pangs of panic every time I received a new call for papers in my inbox announcing "\_\_\_ in the time of COVID." *Is this the most appropriate response?* I could barely get out of bed on some days. The implacable sounds of helicopters and police

sirens and increased surveillance in my neighborhood in central Los Angeles were relentless reminders of Black and Brown unsafety. Disciplinary reactions to anti-Black violence revealed a heavy-handed, white liberalism with an inflated sense of self-importance. I reject this reaction as the automatic response to moments of crisis. Wanting to do and act in ways that are only legible to the ivory tower rather than to sit and reckon, read and listen, slow down and grieve, attests to our thorough socialization of the logics and ways of neoliberal institutions that make up academia's racial capitalist underpinnings.

The social media battles recently fought over the pervasiveness of racist linguists and those that protect them in the name of academic freedom speak to the power and persistence of white supremacy in linguistics and related fields, not to mention the consistent pattern of folks with less institutional power (e.g. graduate students, nontenured faculty) at the frontlines breaking their silence and risking their careers in the process. Current linguistics training does little to meet the urgency required of this moment nor to teach subsequent generations of scholars the ethics of breaking silence on racial and other forms of violence, fomenting a climate that sends the message that minoritized scholars don't matter in linguistics. I contend that silence is the everyday conditionality of acceptance that minoritized scholars experience amidst dehumanizing obligations that attach their worth to legible forms of neoliberal subjectivization.

How might linguistics actively pursue transformative justice for those most marginalized within the field and the academy? We might adopt a view of "interdisciplinarity as plenitude," again, in Chuh's (2021) words. I understand this articulation to mean a refusal of canonized, and hence compartmentalized, knowledge, as well as the tendency of many disciplines to disembodify knowledge formation from the very bodies, histories, and practices

from which knowledge emerges (Chuh 2014). How might we think differently about our so-called canons of knowledge, but also in a broader and more disruptive sense, how might we interrogate the very ways of thinking that have been canonized within the walls of the modern research university?

Viewing interdisciplinarity as plenitude has pedagogical implications for linguistics, especially for minoritized students. Overtly including histories of minoritized subjects and transnational perspectives in linguistics courses has the potential to spur affective intellectual engagement for potential linguists from severely underrepresented groups. Further, a more humanizing approach in linguistics classrooms and research would assert the political force of minoritized difference and claims to material redistribution through partnerships with marginalized communities. Such partnerships can also work to disrupt dominant epistemologies and pedagogies of the academy by decentering knowledge production.

In my rare moments of raw excitement during the dissertation writing process, I wondered why such feelings felt so peculiar and unfamiliar. I experienced a genuine joy of writing and thinking in virtual spaces and phone calls with other graduate students who nonjudgmentally allowed me to experiment with risky ideas and challenged me with more questions and provocations than answers. A more capacious understanding of interdisciplinarity in linguistics would foster such curiosity among graduate students and other scholars rather than foreclosing surprising and creative lines of inquiry. While the field continues to have important conversations led by a few formidable figures, it has already lost numerous brilliant, mostly junior scholars in the process of gatekeeping. I continue to hope for a linguistics where conversations of social justice are not relegated to corners or closed doors, but amalgamate into a collective vision for the field.

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