

# Staging *Hallyu*: K-Pop and K-Drama Reimagined in Asian American Theater

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## Abstract

In the midst of a worldwide fascination with *Hallyu*, South Korea's cultural products, the popularity of K-pop and K-drama has soared to unprecedented levels. In New York City, Korean American playwright Jason Kim's Off-Broadway musical *KPOP* (2017) brought K-pop music and dance to the stage. In the Twin Cities, a Hmong American playwright May Lee-Yang set her play, *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity* (2018), within her Hmong ethnic background, as a romantic satire and homage to K-drama. While both plays function superbly as theatrical entertainment, I argue that these works serve as critical investigations into the methods of creating and disseminating K-pop and K-drama. Both theater pieces bring up issues of racial, gender, sexual, national, and ethnic identities as they reimagine *Hallyu* in North America and assess its impact on Asian America.

Keywords: *Hallyu*, Korean Wave, K-pop, K-drama, Asian American Theater, Jason Kim, May Lee-Yang, *KPOP*, *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity*

## Introduction

In 2011 and 2012, the K-pop singer Psy's music video "Gangnam Style" spread all over the world, hitting unprecedented one-billion views on YouTube. As a result of its sudden explosion of fame, the music video renewed interest in *Hallyu* [Korean Wave] the spread of South Korean media products and culture throughout Asia and other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> In early 2018, South Korea (hereafter Korea) gained much international media attention due to the K-pop boy group BTS's conquering of the Billboard 200 chart; news outlets expounded on the birth, growth, and characteristics of BTS as a new phase of *Hallyu*.<sup>2</sup> K-drama has also achieved tremendous popularity through its own fandom that has rapidly extended outside of Korea to worldwide viewers who easily find Korean

drama episodes on Netflix, Amazon Video, DramaFever, and other internet-streaming services.

In this ever-changing cartography of *Hallyu*'s popularity, this essay will examine two Asian American theatrical works that address the phenomenon of *Hallyu*, critically engaging with K-pop and K-drama: Jason Kim's *KPOP* (2017) and May Lee-Yang's *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity* (2018). I argue that the two contemporary works serve as theatrical interventions of *Hallyu*, revealing its impact on Asian American life. Kim's musical criticizes the K-pop industry that reinforces ageism, sexism, and nationalistic discourse. Lee-Yang's play parodies K-drama to complicate Hmong American women's position in the U.S. Moreover, these two pieces reimagine *Hallyu* as a realm of transpacific belonging where ethnic/racial, gender, sexual, and national identities collide, fluctuate, and negotiate with one another for Asia and Asian America.

Many scholars have followed the development of *Hallyu* and investigated its significances in different sectors such as cultural policy, digital fandom, and intra-Asian cross-border capital flows.<sup>3</sup> With the growth of scholarship on *Hallyu*, the focus of research has expanded beyond numeric results based on statistical per-click traffic analysis to qualitative, philosophical, and theoretical conceptualizations of various aspects of the *Hallyu* phenomenon. Beyond the previous limitations of studies focusing *Hallyu* as a domestic subject, academic interests have become more interdisciplinary with growing global scholarship. Despite the scholarly atmosphere embracing global *Hallyu* studies, there is a scarcity of scholarship on the relationship between theater and the Korean Wave. The two selected case studies in this article endeavor to close this gap by critically examining the theatrical representations of the relationship between the *Hallyu* phenomenon and the circulation of K-pop and K-drama in North America as a new method of making meaning in Asian America.

### ***KPOP: The Making of K-Pop's Identity and Industry***

In New York City, the Off-Broadway musical *KPOP*, written by Korean American playwright Jason Kim, showed off its spectacular production in a run from September 5 to October 21, 2017.<sup>4</sup> The musical displayed glamorous K-pop dances and enthralling music in an immersive setting with an almost all Asian and Asian American cast. Directed by Teddy Bergman, *KPOP* was awarded the 2018 Richard Rodgers Award

for Musical Theater by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Co-produced by Ars Nova, Ma-Yi Theater Company, and Woodshed Collective, the musical gained extensive media attention.<sup>5</sup> The musical digs deep inside the K-pop industry, which emerged within the cultural boundaries of Korea but after achieving international success shifted to reposition its identity somewhere in between Korea, Asia, and the world. As Youna Kim points out, “K-pop is not just a random response to neoliberal globalization, but a systematically planned, monitored, manifestation of ‘entrepreneurial self.’”<sup>6</sup> In *KPOP*, this entrepreneurial element raises critical issues about Korean nationalism, commercialism, the exploitative use of the female body through means such as plastic surgery, weight and birth control, cosmetic obsession, and prescription drug abuse, which are all hidden underneath the dazzling façade of the K-pop star-making system.

The first space encountered by *KPOP* audiences resembles that of a K-pop concert: a large room with high ceiling and several mini black platforms at each corner and the room’s center around which audience members are instructed to stand.<sup>7</sup> In this room, the actual audiences are invited by the fictional Korean American JTM Entertainment management company to be part of a live focus group and tour of the company’s facilities. When introduced through a loudspeaker, the JTM Entertainment management company’s K-pop performers take their places on each platform and pose as JTM president, Mr. Moon, his business partner/wife, Ruby, and the business manager, Jerry, appear center stage. The three executives state the importance of the audience who, after agreeing to participate in this event, are asked two crucial questions: what is K-pop, and can it successfully crossover into the American market? To incorporate audiences into this experiment in identity, the fourth wall is not set up. Cast members act out their parts directly to the audience, asking questions to seek their counsel, support, and opinions. As the play moves actors and audiences to several scenes in different rooms on two levels of a loft theater space, the immersive quality of the site-specific staging of *KPOP* engages the audience into contemplating the pressing questions of K-pop groups and K-pop’s commercial potential. One comes to realize that the unconventional theatrical experience of the production’s immersive quality consistently reinforces the quest for answers to the audience. The very fluidity of its staging, constantly moving the audience through rooms of different sizes, hallways, up and down stairs, sometimes

only catching fleeting bits and pieces of conversations, reflects the K-pop industry's search for its fluctuating definition and future.

The issue of nationalism comes into play as a direct connection to K-pop's identity formation and belonging. Jeongsuk Joo writes that "the transnational recognition of [Korea's] pop culture has become a point of national pride."<sup>8</sup> In *KPOP*, the contentious nationalist discourse about K-pop becomes clear to the audience members when they are ushered into a dance practice room. Here, the five K-pop group members of the boy band called F8 gather and argue over the choice of their new album title song. One Korean member called Oracle asserts that the title song should contain a sense of Koreanness and a soulful melody through which their listeners can feel their authentic Korean quality. Epic, the only Asian American member, disagrees with the assertion that there is something essentially Korean about K-pop. He counteracts Oracle's argument by pointing out that K-pop has grown by transforming itself into a hybrid form without identifiable specificity.<sup>9</sup> Their heated discussion takes place in the mirrored practice room where they not only debate verbally but also physically through song and dance, asking the audience members as K-pop fans to be the judges. At the peak of their disagreement, as no clear winner emerges, the two young men draw a line in the middle of the room and demand that each other band member and each audience member choose sides to decide what K-pop represents: national symbolism or universal hybridity. This particular scene theatricalizes the hegemonic dualism that controls identity discourses of K-pop, amplifying its indeterminacy as it crosses over into the transnational arena. This decision-making moment also allows audience members to become active participants in the search for the definition of K-pop.

Audience members are then led into a meeting room where Jerry, the business manager, raises two direct questions: why until now has K-pop only been a one-time success, and why can it not retain a long-term effect in the mainstream U.S. market? These business queries have been asked before of other foreign dispensable entertainment capital seen in the U.S., such as the 1993 Spanish pop dance song "Macarena." The song became a worldwide hit in 1996-97 by breaking into the U.S. market but as a remix with additional English lyrics. Sue Collins writes about this dispensable quality of certain foreign pop singer celebrities, including Lou Bega, Falco, and Los del Rio.<sup>10</sup> Brian Hu further applies this dispensability to the phenomenon of consuming K-pop in the U.S. by arguing that Psy is located in this genealogy of dispensable celebrities whose disappearance

inevitably occurs subsequent to a huge success.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, previous K-pop artists that had tried to enter the mainstream U.S. market, such as Girls' Generation, Wonder Girls, Rain, Se7en, and BoA, call attention to performers or groups assembled as highly well-made products that are often manufactured, managed, and marketed exclusively for their flawless uniformity, but lack a sense of creativity.<sup>12</sup> John Seabrook writes that Lee Soo-Man, the founder of SM Entertainment and a figure considered by many as the originator of the K-pop star system, created a "manual of cultural technology that catalogued the steps necessary to popularize K-pop artists in different Asian countries."<sup>13</sup> The manual consisted of a set of data that all SM Entertainment employees were to follow for their K-pop performers. Instructions included when to hire composing, producing, and choreographing foreign talent, what types of musical chords to be played and hand gestures to be used in certain countries, and even which color eye shadow performers should wear in specific Asian countries.<sup>14</sup> Though these rules proved to be successful early on in Asia, this highly rational system of management may have contributed to the "McDonaldisation" of the K-pop music business.<sup>15</sup> John Lie notes that K-pop performers have been viewed as "inauthentic automatons singing unoriginal songs or performing East Asian versions of various kinds of American and global popular music," adding that this type of disparagement is clearly prejudice.<sup>16</sup> Another premise as to K-pop's unsuccessful foray into the U.S. pertains to certain groups' genre unappealing to North American viewership. For instance, Wonder Girls used a retro style and look for their 2007 *Tell Me* video. They became highly successful in Korea, but the group failed to make their mark on the U.S. pop music scene.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Girls' Generation was successful enough to sign with a major American music label and even performed on national U.S. television shows, yet was unable to launch a successful American career.<sup>18</sup> Based on viewers' reactions to Girls' Generation U.S. broadcast performances, Eun-Young Jung attributes the group's failure to their simplistic songs and lyrics, and the uncommonly large number of its all-girl group members, which composed an "outdated concept" reminiscent of the 1960s American pop music era.<sup>19</sup>

Jerry's vital question about the short-lived success of K-pop groups and singers also raises the issue of racial demarcation, in which Asianness as a perpetual Other impedes K-pop artists' ability to reach the level of success of any U.S. pop star. Citing a specific incident, Jung points out a racial bias that still permeates white America. After Girls' Generation

performed on the *Live! With Kelly* ABC TV show, the co-host, Howie Mandel, repeatedly praised one of the group members called Tiffany for her English speaking skills, even though she is a Korean American born in California and speaks without an accent. Jung sees this incident as an assumption that any Asian looking person in the U.S. is inevitably considered to be a foreigner.<sup>20</sup> On this racial demarcation, Jung further analyzes that the U.S. public image of Wonder Girls, formulated by their male manager, created a “China Doll look” to make them look more attractive. Yet, this marketing ploy erased the individual characteristics of each member and perpetuated the stereotype that “all Asians look alike.”<sup>21</sup>

In sum, K-pop performers in North America may well achieve a chain of one-time sensations and gain some media attention by performing with spectacular homogeneity. However, they cannot be viewed as real stars through a combination of originality of talent and sustained commercial viability, as seen with the careers of Michael Jackson and Lady Gaga for example, thus becoming disposable Othered human capital for entertainment. Although stated earnestly, Jerry’s question in fact leads the audience to ponder these underlying complex issues of K-pop’s intersection with race, explored through audience participation.

*KPOP* then segues into the subject of human exploitation by presenting the vulnerability of certain K-pop group members, whose body and mental health issues are treated in unethical ways. Audience members are led into a corridor in between rooms where they witness a plastic surgeon thoroughly measuring the face of a seemingly insecure member of the all-female K-pop group, Special K, for possible cosmetic rectification surgery. This scene covertly puts forward a critical view of Korean Wave cultural products, which create a *look*-centered society. This “lookism” forces young Korean women to sanction the ideals of a made-up beauty seen in K-drama and K-pop, thus pressuring them to make alterations of their bodies.<sup>22</sup> The continuous fabrication of beauty in K-drama and K-pop has normalized the practices of bodily modification and facial plastic surgery, setting the idea that corporeal beauty is a prerequisite for success.

For instance, in a ruthless job market where a prospective employee typically submits a portrait photo with her/his résumé, cosmetic surgery in Korea has been a way for women, as well as men, to become more competitive.<sup>23</sup> This need for beauty replication has turned Korea into the world’s plastic surgery capital, with approximately one third of its revenue coming from abroad, attracting mostly Chinese cosmetic surgery tourists

enticed by the desire to be part of *Hallyu* pop culture. According to Patricia Marx, “throughout Asia, the ‘Korean wave’ of pop culture (called *Hallyu*) shapes not only what music you should listen to but what you should look like while listening to it.”<sup>24</sup> In the musical *KPOP*, the scene with the plastic surgeon insinuates the message that the body-capital of K-pop is under an invasive reforming process, practiced as a type of ritual that performers need to be successful. In another doctor’s room, the emotional pressure from which K-pop performers suffer is revealed when another member asks help for her sleep disorder and anxiety issues. The indifferent company doctor prescribes sleeping pills without offering any proper psychological care for her very noticeable depression and anxiety. This scene particularly resonates with K-pop fans as performer Jong-hyun from SHINee, one of the most successful K-pop boy groups since 2008, lost his battle with depression and committed suicide in 2017.<sup>25</sup> By disclosing the scenes that underscore the issues of body image and mental health, *KPOP* intervenes in the K-pop star system that hides the exploitation of human capital by instilling in its members the fear of being judged “defective,” should they not meet the standards of perfect looks and everlasting fame. In addition, these scenes transform the audience not only into witnesses of this industry’s assembly line process, but also silent accomplices.

*KPOP*’s unveiling of the sheer curtain of the K-pop industry becomes even more pronounced as it broaches the issue of femininity and age. *KPOP* reveals how capitalistic exploitation is used to reiterate the master narrative of what it means to be a woman in the K-pop industry: young, beautiful, and docile. In this intersection of capitalistic and sexist cultures, unrealistic femininity is inscribed on youth culture by the compulsory belief that women can be successful—and therefore useful—only if they accept their projected images endorsed by society. In one episode of *KPOP*, a few audience members are separated from the main performance space and invited into a small area resembling an intimate hotel lounge. The interior design of the space with an indoor tree and pond-shaped empty mini-pool creates a dream-like yet stifling atmosphere due to its very low ceiling. The entertainment company president’s wife, Ruby, welcomes the audience like VIP guests to this special private time with the twenty-six-year-old K-pop star, MwE, who ordinarily would never meet her fans up-close and on a personal level. As the audience crowds into the private space, MwE is noticeably disturbed by this unannounced visit and balks at her boss’s request that she perform for the audience. In a show of hierarchical power-dynamics between employer and employee, Ruby

makes it clear that the singer, who so far has represented the company through her performances as well as products such as their perfume, should be more accommodating.<sup>26</sup> In a final blow, Ruby mentions how a new younger female performer is ready to take MwE's place at any given moment. Desperately frightened to lose her status and become useless because of her age, MwE complies and performs for the audience. In this segment, *KPOP* clearly reflects the work ethics for women in the K-pop industry, who must perpetuate their given roles in which they constantly perform, always have the perfect body and face, stay young forever, abandon independence, and accept submissiveness.

Since the K-pop industry has continuously evolved to follow a profit-generative mechanism, a counter-hegemonic image of girl groups, which exemplifies a resistance to the prevalent representation of female docility in K-pop, has been marketed with a few groups such as 2NE1, f(x), Brown Eyed Girls, and the solo artist Lee Hyori.<sup>27</sup> Yet, through this scene, *KPOP* confirms that the industry disallows female autonomy, limiting diverse types of femininity other than a young tamable beauty and showing success is only attainable if women relinquish their individuality and assertive voice.<sup>28</sup>

At the end of *KPOP*, audience members reunite with the cast of performers and management in the same large space as in the beginning. Jerry discusses his findings and offers his resignation as he expresses his failure to categorically define K-pop. Mr. Moon rejects his resignation, suggesting the possibility that K-pop cannot be defined, and that further investigation must and will continue. The show then ends with a thrilling song and dance production in a sentiment of mutual admiration and understanding through artistic expression.

While the musical *KPOP* concludes on a joyful note, the unanswered question about the definition of K-pop leaves audiences with a sense of longing. By bringing the inquiries about K-pop to the stage, Kim unveils larger issues that are not openly discussed in the K-pop industry but that are deeply connected to Asian Americans. As Kim states, *KPOP* is a way to explore his own self and culture, and deal with "themes of identity and acceptance and race and immigration," questions that he has contended with his entire life.<sup>29</sup> For Kim, the search for K-pop's indefinable identity is a metaphoric engagement with Asian America: "I thought of myself as a Korean person, as a Korean-American person, as an American person. As a person who wants to be white, as a person who doesn't want to be white. As a person who wants to be the minority, as a person who doesn't



want to be the minority. The narrative of the show feels to me like a narrative that many people experience.”<sup>30</sup> When asked what he learned about his own identity during the creative process, Kim answered, “I could write about it for as long as I live. But I may maybe never understand it.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the identities of Asian America and K-pop share this sense of uncertainty, which creates the feeling of ephemerality that comes across throughout the entire performance of *KPOP*. Through the immersive quality of Kim’s play, morphing content with form, *KPOP* renders the message that we should accept the fluctuating liminality of K-pop and, by doing so, reimagine *Hallyu* not *in* but *as* a constant flux of belonging and positioning.

### ***The Korean Drama Addict’s Guide to Losing Your Virginity: Situating K-Drama In-between Reality and Fantasy***

The world premiere of May Lee-Yang’s newest play, *The Korean Drama Addict’s Guide to Losing Your Virginity*, ran from July 27 to August 19, 2018. It was produced at the Andy Boss Thrust Stage at Park Square Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, in partnership with Theater Mu (hereafter Mu).<sup>32</sup> Directed by Randy Reyes, the play’s plotline centers on Gao Hlee, a Hmong American woman personality coach addicted to K-drama. She meets Benedict Song, an heir of the Korean conglomerate Song Song Group, who is exiled to its Midwest headquarters. Gao Hlee is trying to find the man of her dreams before her upcoming thirtieth birthday, while Benedict, who once aspired and trained to be a K-pop idol, endeavors to accept his fate as a future corporate leader. Fantasy, reality, destiny, and cultural differences intermingle in Lee-Yang’s satirical romantic comedy.<sup>33</sup> Based on her personal experience as an Asian American woman who spent much time at home watching Korean television drama while fostering four children, Lee-Yang states that watching K-drama is “a form of escapism and self-care,” as her main character points out in the play.<sup>34</sup> Drawing on the conventions of characters and plotlines in K-drama, Lee-Yang dramatizes the clash between her Hmong ethnic background and Korean cultural values conveyed in TV drama spaces.<sup>35</sup>

In comparison to Kim’s *KPOP*, which directly approaches the entrepreneurial aspect of the K-pop industry, Lee-Yang’s play employs the power of comedy to satirize K-drama. In her playwright’s note, Lee-Yang writes that “in the actual play, there are two worlds: REALITY is where most of the play is grounded. Occasionally we go into

DRAMALAND where specific scenes from Korean Dramas are re-enacted by ENSEMBLE MEMBERS. DRAMALAND scenes should attempt to be as authentic as possible with costume and staging.”<sup>36</sup> As a strategy of parody, Lee-Yang inserts throughout the play multiple vignettes of “DRAMALAND” often seen in typical repertoires of K-drama. She makes use of stereotypical situations in K-drama perennial characterizations and scenes, such as the young rich man’s initial rudeness toward the young poor woman, the woman caught in the rain “rescued” by the male protagonist, and the “evil” rich mother’s attempt to pay off the lower class woman to keep her away from her son. The inclusion of these familiar scenes that audience members could recognize from having watched Korean drama becomes more vivid with the addition of referential music scores and costumes. In Mu’s production, the original soundtrack “Almost Paradise” from the 2009 K-drama *Boys Over Flowers* is heard several times.<sup>37</sup>

Lee-Yang’s consistent utilization of referential music as a pattern throughout the play brings to mind the idea of indexicality. In his book on Korean popular culture, Kyung Hyun Kim writes of indexicality as a concept that allows a reinterpretation and a new experience of a sign which, when viewed in terms of pop music, can create a “greater meaning for a song.”<sup>38</sup> As a sonic index, the signature music thus cues the audience to remember scenes from actual Korean TV drama and compare them to the parodic scenes on stage. For example, Benedict appears multiple times on stage with referential music signifying his connection to the affluent lead character Gu Junpyo in *Boys Over Flowers*. Aside from the play and the TV drama’s association through music, both male characters also have in common signifiers in terms of costumes and mannerisms, with similar clothing and accessories, the same arrogant attitude, and an insensitive use of words. While these indices could easily be read by audience members who were familiar with *Boys Over Flowers*, those who were not privy to the references still laughed at the campiness of the parodic depictions and could recall comparable scenes that they might have come across in other Korean television drama. The original song from *Boys Over Flowers*, used in a romantic way in the TV drama, became reinterpreted as a parodic referential music on stage. During the performance I attended, some audience members reacted to the parodic situations and characterizations by immediately whispering to each other the names of the K-drama shows from which these scenes were taken. In the context of the production, the

combination of aural and visual indices thus creates through laughter the greater meaning of an imagined community for the audience.

Lee-Yang parodies not only Korean drama but also Thai-Hmong TV drama by comparing different points of view, held by her characters, on mediated entertainment from Asia. Gao Hlee's mother criticizes her daughter's obsession with K-drama, stating that she prefers the more "realistic" Hmong or Thai drama to K-drama because they show women's "real" life. Lee-Yang throws an ironic twist on this comment when at one point in the play a scene from an imagined Hmong TV drama takes place. This episode shows a young man who falls in love with a young woman and says he will marry her that evening; however, that night she gets kidnapped by an evil man. After three days she escapes and meets the young man, who in the meantime has not only taken one wife but two, and asks her to be his third wife.

This parody of Hmong drama serves as a defense for Gao Hlee's addiction to the romance of Korean TV drama. She says that in K-dramas, when a man and a woman love each other, they "either live happily ever after or they die of cancer."<sup>39</sup> Gao Hlee and her mother have different ideas not only about the "reality" of heterosexual relationships represented in television but also about the meanings of watching Asian TV programs. Gao Hlee's immigrant mother holds a nostalgic view of Asia, with traditional gender roles represented in Thai-Hmong TV shows that remind her of her homeland,<sup>40</sup> whereas Gao Hlee immerses herself into an Asian "DRAMALAND," imagined by the stylized sights and sounds of contemporary Korean drama, as the way to care for herself.<sup>41</sup> This exchange of their conflicting thoughts about TV programs is important because it signifies intergenerational communication through sharing Asian diasporic experiences in consuming mediated cultural products in the U.S.

The intergenerational conflict between Gao Hlee and her mother, however, is not just around imagined gendered relationships in ethnic media representations but also on the subject of Gao Hlee's sexual life. As a Hmong American woman, Gao Hlee fluctuates between the fantasy world created by K-drama and her "real" world that coexists with Hmong supernatural beliefs. Her mother's ceaseless intervention in her daughter's intimate relationships with men has to do with Gao Hlee's destined future in which, according to Hmong shamanism, she is to become a shaman unless she loses her virginity before her thirtieth birthday. This destiny is based on the Hmong shamanistic belief that some female shamans become

barren after the beginning of their training, as the spirits necessitate a woman's eggs as a sacrifice, although family members can negotiate to have their daughter give birth before training.<sup>42</sup>

On stage, Lee-Yang presents Gao Hlee confronting her supernatural fate through her ability to see ghosts. The ghosts try to possess Gao Hlee by making physical contact with her, though she always manages to resist their attempts. The ghosts appear in different forms, including an archetypal Korean female ghost with long straight hair worn down and a white Korean traditional outfit. This type of plotline incorporating ghosts as characters can also be found in recent Korean TV drama shows, such as *Masters' Sun* (2013), *Oh My Ghost* (2015), and *Hey Ghost, Let's Fight* (2016). The staging of these ghost characters creates dramatic tension by interfering with Gao Hlee's real life and imparting a sense of urgency to her loss of virginity deadline. More importantly, these liminal figures serve as transcultural figures which represent not only her traditional Hmong heritage but also her infatuation with K-drama that extends even into her supernatural world.<sup>43</sup>

In connection with Gao Hlee's sexual life, Lee-Yang brings in gender politics to question what it means to be a Hmong woman in the U.S., particularly in the Midwest. Lee-Yang introduces an ultra-nationalistic and conservative character named Tou Mong, who is a Ph.D. candidate specializing in "the evolution of Hmong men's roles in American society" as well as Gao Hlee's ex-boyfriend.<sup>44</sup> In a scene at a conference called, "The Hmong Men Empowering Hmong Men Conference," Tou Mong gives a speech advocating anti-K-drama discourse. He attacks K-drama's unrealistic romantic depiction of heterosexual relationships that ironically encourages Hmong women to break away from the Hmong tradition. He bases the entire argument on his finding that K-drama has turned Hmong women in Minnesota into prudes who choose to stay at home binge watching Korean TV drama shows rather than date.<sup>45</sup> As supporting evidence for his scholarly argument, Tou Mong, in an absurdly hilarious moment, proudly cites the statistics that in 2001, Hmong people had "the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the State of Minnesota and probably the U.S." but laments that Hmong women today at age thirty are still single with no children.<sup>46</sup> Tou Mong believes that the liberation of Hmong female sexuality in the U.S. has instead wrought asexuality, a direct consequence of the influence of K-drama that is an ethnic cultural threat decreasing the power of Hmong masculinity. Gao Hlee angrily disrupts Tou Mong's speech with an intense argument over Hmong women's agency and role

in their community, then storms out. Through this satirical scene, Lee-Yang assails patriarchal values in Hmong ethnic culture that are embodied by Tou Mong as an oppressive force imposed upon Hmong women. Here, Tou Mong views K-drama as a medium that leads Hmong women to “betray” ethnic cultures, whereas Gao Hlee considers K-drama as a form of self-care.<sup>47</sup> These contrasting perspectives on K-drama reveal the contentious antithesis between ethnic nationalism and feminism to which women of color in the U.S. have been subjected.

In contrast, Lee-Yang’s portrayal of Gao Hlee and Benedict as a romantic couple challenges the popular patterns of racialized Asian stereotypes typically shown in North American film and TV. Lee-Yang writes in her playwright’s notes that,

as a Person of Color, it is rare to see our narratives represented on the stage, TV, and movies. If we exist, we are relegated to supporting roles, educating people about our past, or speaking with broken accents. Asian women are fetishized and paired with any romantic lead but an Asian man, and Asian men are usually emasculated. I wanted to do something revolutionary: write a love story that centers on two Asian people.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, Elaine H. Kim writes about this prejudiced sexual and gender deviance in the U.S. in terms of race. Asian men are stereotyped as asexual and Asian women as exclusively sexual in order to “define the white man’s virility and the white race’s superiority.”<sup>49</sup> Thus the images of Asian American men and women have historically been represented in contrast to one another to uphold “white masculine hegemony” and render Asian women sexually available to white men only.<sup>50</sup> Lee-Yang’s representation of the romantic relationship between Gao Hlee and Benedict is a strategy against this very practice of racism embedded in cultural representations in North America. Recently, the 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians* garnered much publicity for being able to finally fracture the narrative of a white-centered idea of Asian American representation in movies, in particular about romantic relationships between Asian women and men in North American mass media. Contemplating the impact of the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, Asian American writer and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen states, “We live in an economy of narrative scarcity, in which we feel deprived and must fight to tell our own stories and fight against the stories that

distort or erase us.”<sup>51</sup> *The Korean Drama Addict’s Guide to Losing Your Virginity* could very well be at the forefront of such a change in theater.

Lee-Yang’s play ends on the blooming romantic relationship between Gao Hlee and Benedict as they watch a Korean drama in bed. Behind their bed facing the audience center stage, the entire cast, including ghosts, is revealed as they too watch the drama, crying and laughing. This last tableau unveils Lee-Yang’s idea that watching a Korean TV drama is more than just a form of escapism and self-care, but a way to create cross-cultural communication and bonding that bridge differences even among those in the afterlife. Thanks to K-drama, the characters achieve a mutual understanding through the shared connection and enjoyment of this particular *Hallyu* cultural product and configure a sense of belonging to a triangulated confluence of East Asia, South Asia, and Asian America. In terms of the representation of *Hallyu* on stage, the fact that Lee-Yang selected K-drama as the vehicle for her depiction of a Hmong American woman’s life is a telling sign of the increasing influence of *Hallyu* on Asian America.

## Conclusion

In its search for an answer to a crossover U.S. commercial appeal, *KPOP* generates a self-reflective look at the K-pop industry. *KPOP*’s highly critical findings divulge hidden aspects of the K-pop business complicated by commercialism and nationalism. Through the parody of K-drama, *The Korean Drama Addict’s Guide to Losing Your Virginity* unveils Asian America’s intergenerational differences, conflicts in gender and ethnic politics, and racial stereotypes by presenting a romantic Asian American story between a Hmong American woman and a Korean man. In their roles as interventions with *Hallyu*, both plays foreground Asian American theater as a space for critical discourses to scrutinize the politics of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Thus, *Hallyu* on stage is reimaged to bring to light the continuous emergence of identity and belonging which, conceivably, is neither East nor West, local nor global, but rather lies *within* the unstoppable unfurling Wave itself crossing the Pacific.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hallyu* can be traced to the popularity of Korean television drama in Asian countries especially Japan and China in the new millennium. In the early 2000s two Korean TV

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dramas opened the gates for K-drama: *Winter Sonata*, which aired in Japan and *Jewel in the Palace*, which was distributed in Chinese-language TV programs all over the world. See Chua Beng Huat, *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 148.

<sup>2</sup> BTS is a South Korean boy group, formed by Big Hit Entertainment, consisting of seven members since 2013. BTS is an acronym for their Korean group name “BangTan Sonyeondan” which means “bulletproof boy group or boy scouts.” “BTS, Twitter’s favorite boy band, makes history with No. 1 K-pop album,” *USA Today*, May 29, 2018, accessed August 6, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2018/05/28/bts-k-pop-band-billboard-album/649779002/>. See also Hugh McIntyre, “BTS Talks Conquering America Like No K-Pop Act In U.S. History,” *Forbes*, November 8, 2017, accessed August 6, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2017/11/08/bts-talks-conquering-america-like-no-k-pop-act-in-u-s-history/#303ac2b059b0>.

<sup>3</sup> Chinese media first coined the word *Hallyu*, meaning “the Korean Wave,” in the late 1990s when Korean TV drama suddenly became exceedingly popular in China. Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin, Introduction to *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*, eds. Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), xi. See also Sangjoon Lee and Abé Mark Nornes, eds. *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); and Do Kyun Kim and Min-Sun Kim, eds. *Hallyu: Influence of Korean Popular Culture in Asia and Beyond* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Jason Kim was born in South Korea and moved to the United States at the age of eleven. His works have been produced nationally at Ars Nova, Ma-Yi, Keen Company, Naked Angels, the Flea, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Williamstown Theater Festival, and the Washington National Opera, among other venues. At the time of this writing, Kim serves as Lincoln Center Theater’s Resident Writer. See Walter Byongsok Chon, “The ‘Kpop’ Invasion in a New American Musical Part II: Interview with Jason Kim and Helen Park,” *Theatre Times*, January 2, 2018, accessed August 7, 2018, <https://thetheatretimes.com/kpop-invasion-new-american-musical-part-ii-interview-jason-kim-helen-park/>.

<sup>5</sup> “‘KPOP’ Hits Off Broadway,” *New Yorker*, September 4, 2017, accessed August 7, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/04/kpop-hits-off-broadway>. See Ben Brantley, “‘KPOP’ Sings and Dances Its Way Through a Divided Culture,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2017, accessed August 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/theater/kpop-musical-review.html>. See also Sara Holdren, “*KPOP* Is Gangnam Style With Substance Beneath,” *Vulture*, September 22, 2017, accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/09/theater-review-kpop-is-gangnam-style-with-substance-beneath.html>. See also Olivia Clement, “What Do Critics Think of *KPOP* Off-Broadway,” *Playbill*, September 25, 2017, accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.playbill.com/article/what-do-critics-think-of-kpop-off-broadway>. At the time of this writing, the producers of *KPOP* were in talks for a 2019 return production. Olivia Clement, “*KPOP* Musical Aims for 2019 Off-Broadway Return,” *Playbill*, May 18, 2018, accessed September 27, 2018, <http://www.playbill.com/article/kpop-musical-aims-for-2019-off-broadway-return>.

<sup>6</sup> Youna Kim, Introduction to *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2013), 8.

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<sup>7</sup> I attended a performance of *KPOP* at the A.R.T./New York Theatres on October 14, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Jeongsuk Joo, "Transnationalization of Korean Popular Culture and the Rise of 'Pop Nationalism' in Korea," *Journal of Popular Culture*, (44:3): 489-504, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Sun Jung uses the notion of *mugukjeok* (meaning "no nationality") to write about *Hallyu's* intrinsic process of mixing Korean and global cultural elements thus creating a less culturally specific hybrid. See Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 3-60.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Collins, "Making the Most Out of 15 Minutes: Reality TV's Dispensable Celebrity," *Television & New Media* (9:2): 87-110, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Hu, "RIP Gangnam Style" in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, eds. Sangjoon Lee and Abé Mark Nornes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 229-244.

<sup>12</sup> Before Psy's huge success, these K-pop singers and groups were popular among Asian ethnic groups in the U.S. but BTS, as the first K-pop artist group, has successfully enabled K-pop to crossover into mainstream U.S. music industry. The musical *KPOP* only deals with the facets of K-pop before BTS, whose style transformed the previous notion of what it means to be an Asian male in the Western world. Significantly, in September 2018 the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly invited BTS to deliver a speech in which they encouraged younger generations to find their voice and love themselves no matter what their race, skin color, and gender identity.

<sup>13</sup> John Seabrook, *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 93.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Inkyu Kang, "The political economy of idols: South Korea's neoliberal restructuring and its impact of the entertainment labour force" in *K-pop – The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, eds. JungBong Choi and Roald Maliangkay (New York: Routledge, 2015), 62.

<sup>16</sup> John Lie, *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 144.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-7.

<sup>18</sup> Eun-Young Jung, "K-pop female idols in the West: racial imagination and erotic fantasies," in *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2013), 116.

<sup>19</sup> Jung writes of the Girls' Generation "nine (or more?) members," and that after their performance on the David Letterman Show "many American viewers seemed to be overwhelmed by seeing such a large number of Asian girls and some felt that there were more than nine girls, as expressed on YouTube and Twitter: Do we really need like 15 girls singing at the same time? [...] the weirdest Asian group is performing on Letterman, there's like 50 of them." *Ibid.*, 115-6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Sharon Heijin Lee, "The (Geo)Politics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism, and Neoliberalism in South Korean Beauty Culture," Ph.D. diss. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2012), 44-57.



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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Marx, “About Face: Why is South Korea the world’s plastic-surgery capital?” *New Yorker*, March 23, 2015, accessed September 9, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> K-pop singer, composer, and lyricist Jong-hyun’s suicide shocked fans and their outcry forced the industry to address their stars’ mental well-being. See Amy B. Wang, “K-pop star’s suicide note reveals pressures of fame, depression that ‘consumed’ him,”

*Washington Post*, December 19, 2018, accessed August 14, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/19/k-pop-stars-suicide-note-reveals-depression-that-consumed-him-pressures-of-fame/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.bc4ab1d95449](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/19/k-pop-stars-suicide-note-reveals-depression-that-consumed-him-pressures-of-fame/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.bc4ab1d95449).

<sup>26</sup> Many of *Hallyu*’s other products such as cosmetics, fashion, food, films, computer and online games are advertised using the glamorous images of K-pop and K-drama stars.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Epstein and James Turnbull write that among K-pop’s girl groups “2NE1 in particular has gained a reputation for feisty independence.” See Stephen Epstein with James Turnbull, “Girls’ Generation? Gender, (Dis)Empowerment, and K-pop,” in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, eds. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 328.

<sup>28</sup> The K-pop world has no room for lesbian, bi-sexual, and pregnant women, and only allows the rare presence of married women as well as women over thirty.

<sup>29</sup> Kat Chow, “A New Musical—And Its Audience—Grapple With Asian Identity, Through K-Pop,” October 5, 2017, *National Public Radio*, accessed September 29, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/10/05/554738860/a-new-musical-and-its-audience-grapple-with-asian-identity-through-k-pop>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Theater Mu is a member of the Twin Cities Theaters of Color Coalition along with Penumbra Theatre, New Native Theater, Teatro del Pueblo and Pangea World Theater. Mu’s mission is to bring to Midwestern theater audiences the experiences and identity of Asian Americans and their communities. See “Mission,” *Theater Mu*, accessed October 5, 2018, <http://www.muperformingarts.org/mission/>.

<sup>33</sup> Born in a Thai refugee camp, May Lee-Yang moved to Minnesota with her family at the age of nine months. Based in the Twin Cities, Lee-Yang has produced her works as poet, playwright, and performance artist. See Kathy Berdan, “May Lee-Yang is a playwright, author, poet—and self-proclaimed lazy Hmong woman,” *Pioneer Press*, August 3, 2018, accessed August 20, 2018, <https://www.twincities.com/2018/08/03/may-lee-yang-is-a-playwright-author-poet-and-self-proclaimed-lazy-hmong-woman/>.

<sup>34</sup> Basil Considine, “INTERVIEW: May Lee-Yang On *The Korean Drama Addict’s Guide To Losing Your Virginity*,” *Twin Cities Arts Reader*, May 29, 2018, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://twincitiesarts.com/2018/05/29/interview-may-lee-yang-korean-drama-addicts-guide/>.

<sup>35</sup> The first Hmong refugees arrived in the U.S. in 1975 but wide-scale Hmong immigration started after the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act. Hmong population settled in large parts in California and the Midwest. See Kou Yang, *The Making of Hmong America: Forty Years after the Secret War* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 45-139.

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<sup>36</sup> May Lee-Yang, *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity*, unpublished, 2018, 3. (Capitalization by Lee-Yang).

<sup>37</sup> *Boys Over Flowers* is a KBS2 Korean television drama consisting of twenty-five episodes that aired from January 5 to March 31, 2009. Based on an original Japanese manga by Kamio Yoko, the drama tells the story of an average girl's life complicated by a group of wealthy boys as she ends up falling in love with one of the young rich inheritors. The widespread pan-Asian popularity of this TV drama created *Hallyu* stars out of the lead actress and actor and episodes continue to be available on a number of North American streaming venues. For more information about different audience responses regarding this particular TV program, see Suk-Young Kim, "For the Eyes of North Koreans? Politics of Money and Class in *Boys Over Flowers*," in *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2013), 93-105.

<sup>38</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, Introduction to *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, eds. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Lee-Yang, *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> The stage directions of one of Gao Hlee's "DRAMALAND" fantasies reads: "*a door opens and BENEDICT SONG enters with a posse of Hot Asian Men in the classic F4 entrance in Boys Over Flowers.*" Lee-Yang, *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> In the theater lobby of the production, Mu displayed the following description of Hmong shamanism to increase the familiarity for audiences: "a religious system in which a shaman serves a medium between the spirit and physical worlds. The shaman, also known in Hmong as Txiv Neeb, normally helps others communicate with spirits. [...] Not all Hmong people practice shamanism." The display also included promotional K-drama posters, information on the Korean Wave, reasons why everyone was addicted to K-drama, fun facts, and a recommended list of Korean TV drama programs.

<sup>43</sup> In an interview, Lee-Yang points out the similarity between Hmong shamanism and Korean shamanism as a connection between the two cultures in the play. May Lee-Yang, tape recording interview with the author. Minneapolis, August 3, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Lee-Yang, *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> For more information about the concepts of "betrayal" and "disloyalty" pertaining to Asian American women, see Leslie Bow, *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Lee-Yang, "Playwright's notes," in playbill for *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Your Virginity*.

<sup>49</sup> Elaine H. Kim, "Such Opposite Creatures: Men and Women in Asian American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, (29:1): 68-93, 1990.

<sup>50</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 107.

<sup>51</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Asian-Americans Need More Movies, Even Mediocre Ones," *New York Times*, August 21, 2018, accessed September 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/opinion/crazy-rich-asians-movie.html>.