A Raciosemiotics of Appropriation: Transnational Performance of Raciogender among Mexican K-Pop Fans

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ABSTRACT

Advancing a raciosemiotics (Smalls 2020) of appropriation, this article examines what happens when raciolinguistically charged signs circulate and are taken up in a context different to their production. Based on face-to-face and digital ethnography of K-pop fans in Mexico, this study presents a multimodal semiotic analysis of fans' metapragmatic discourses and social media practices. I show how fans orient to the female K-pop idol, a mediatized figure of personhood (Agha 2005; Hiramoto and Kang 2017) indexical of hegemonic cosmopolitan femininity but simultaneously an exotic racialized Other in many non-Korean contexts. My examination of fan discourses and performance on social media treats the characterological figure of the female K-pop idol as a desirable, aspirational racial other for Mexican fans, while attending to the sociohistorical specificities of Asian racialization in the context of Mexico. The characterological figure is shaped by, and must interact with, local racial ideologies. My analysis suggests that such performances allow fans to differentiate themselves from other Mexican youth by demonstrating their knowledge of intra-Asian differences. Moreover, they are able to fashion neoliberal and queer subjectivities, albeit conditionally, through their indexical approximation of K-pop idols.

The pulsating bass of an ongoing performance becomes palpable as I apprehensively approach my destination. I start to make out clusters of three, four, five animated individuals and a dazzling bricolage of vibrantly dyed hair, elaborate makeup, cloth face masks, platform sneakers, and coordinated

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outfits. Their 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 dropped in utter disbelief. Succumbing to the weight of prolonged gazes and scattered giggles, I enter the venue in haste and hurriedly purchase a day pass to enter Expo Reforma, one of Mexico City's premier convention centers. I'm here to experience KShow, the largest K-pop convention in Mexico to date. And as I look around at the numerous booths of Korean street food and merchandise vendors, I can feel my face getting hot again as the dense mass of attendees continues to stare. That's when I realize: I am the only Korean in sight. After an unsuccessful attempt to recuperate from my surprise, I accidentally lock eyes with a stranger who confidently asks for a photo. *Oh, um, cómo no.* Why not, I respond reticently. That was a mistake. Other staring onlookers, emboldened by my acquiescent response, begin to swarm around me. After the third selfie, with the crowd growing, closing in on me, I abruptly apologize to strangers in the line that has quickly formed and excuse myself, beginning to circulate the venue aimlessly, unable to shake the crowd's response and the continued stares of concertgoers.

This episode early on during my fieldwork examining Korean popular culture in Mexico has continued to generate questions for me. Why did K-pop fans respond to me in that way, in that context, and what was the meaning of that unmistakable glimmer of recognition? What are the intertextual relations between mediatized representations of the K-pop idol and local conceptions of racial others? How does one make sense of K-pop fan activities that take place in contexts where Koreans are racialized as a monolith (i.e., as Asian, if not *chinos*)? It was as though the K-pop acts they had paid no small amount of money to see had been ideologically laminated onto my own racial gendered embodiment. Indeed, in Mexico and in many other Latin American contexts, there has been a surge in celebrities and digital influencers who have garnered a following from branding themselves as experts on Korean culture. Their popularity is inextricably linked to the global influence of Korean popular culture and especially the increasingly hegemonic presence of Korean cultural production in Latin American countries.

In an attempt to answer these questions, I attend to how fans orient to the female K-pop idol, a mediatized figure of personhood (Agha 2005, 2011; Hiramoto and Kang 2017) indexical of hegemonic cosmopolitan femininity but simultaneously an exotic racialized Other in many non-Korean contexts. If figures of personhood tie metasemiotic discourse to specific imaginations about person types, how does the projection of the K-pop idol become laminated onto and

shape perceptions of ethnic Koreans and Asians in Mexico? Put differently, how might a characterological figure such as the K-pop star relate to local changes in social identities? I first establish what the idol is within the K-pop industry and how K-pop fans describe and orient to K-pop idols to trace the emergence of the characterological type. I then discuss how K-pop fans metadiscursively distinguish K-pop as Korean while double-voicing nonparticipants' racialization of K-pop as Chinese/Asian and therefore "weird." Such discourses, I argue, are linked to historical, racializing logics in Mexico that are rooted in anti-Chinese racism and that contemporaneously render all Asians foreign and hence strange. Finally, I illustrate how K-pop fans cite the K-pop idol figure by way of embodied gestures; the indexical associations with this figure allow fans to engage in socioculturally specific contestations of personhood, including performing queerness and fashioning local fan identities.

K-pop's immense global popularity—in large part due to its easy circulation online—has proliferated local fandoms across the globe. Even as they appear wholly devoted to a globalized genre, fans generate local forms of performance and popular subcultures. In other words, their engagement with K-pop can elucidate transnational semiotic processes that are situated and unfolding. Studies that have examined racialized meanings vis-à-vis K-pop tend to bifurcate along a Western/non-Western binary (with K-pop often being treated as an autochthonously Korean product) without sufficiently accounting for the transnational blurring of such binaries and/or socioculturally specific engagements with K-pop that account for locally meaningful categories of race and gender. I am interested in examining the scalar dimensions of K-pop's circulation—the tensions between macro processes of globalization and possible (re)significations that emerge from local engagements. More specifically, I am invested in historicizing the global popularity of an ostensibly Korean genre and its ensuing affective attachments within the context of ongoing Asian racialization in Mexico/Latin America. Asians are popularly not considered racialized in the Mexican context because they're not considered part of the body politic of the modern nationstate (Siu 2016; Chang 2017). Some of my participants represent a crucial counter to this logic as they deploy a critical apparatus for understanding their K-pop fan practices alongside historical discourses vis-à-vis the ongoing racialization of Asians in Mexico.

By attending to how signs become racialized locally or are reinterpreted as they circulate transnationally, a semiotics of race can elucidate how a given group may shift their understanding of or orientation to locally racialized populations. As Krystal Smalls (2020) has recently theorized, signs—linguistic and

otherwise—come to be racialized even as they reify racializing structures. Smalls' interlocutors recruit circulating multimodal semiotic resources to fashion Black diasporic identities, which are further inflected for gender and national belonging. Crucially, her analysis reveals that racialized meaning cannot be known a priori but require an ethnographic accounting of how such signs come to be racialized in context. Following her lead, I aim to posit a raciosemiotics of the transnational that engages a thick accounting of competing indexical meaning by employing robust methods of semiotic anthropology to reveal the ideological-material effects of sign circulation. In thinking with Smalls and other linguistic anthropologists whose work disrupts taken-for-granted notions vis-à-vis race and language (Rosa and Flores 2017; Alim et al. 2020; Smalls 2020, 2021), I consider the circulation of signs associated with K-pop-ness (and its close correlate for many global fans: Koreanness) that are primarily consumed through mediatized events, namely the spectacle of K-pop. Just as I show in my study of how signs of Blackness get de- and recontextualized in global performances of K-pop (Garza 2021), here I examine how globalized signs associated with Koreanness are cited transnationally and the indexical excesses left in the wake of such performances. This work has implications for reviving discussions of so-called appropriation by complicating notions of power as genres circulate in a transnational affective economy fueled by popular culture and proliferating fandoms. My thinking has been greatly influenced by recent theorizations of embodiment in sociolinguistics (e.g., Bucholtz and Hall 2016) and especially Smalls's (2020, 238) articulation of the body as "relevant context and co-text" to ascertain and constrain the range of indexical meanings associated with racialized linguistic and other semiotic signs.

I consider these theoretical interventions alongside recent resuscitations of citationality and performativity in linguistic anthropology (Nakassis 2012, 2013). Nakassis theorizes citationality as a form of interdiscursivity (Silverstein 2005): a discursive act that links two or more events (minimally itself and another, or even itself and a figuration of itself) within the same frame. Citations index another semiotic act, and in so doing, they calibrate (at least) two time-spaces that are at some level of spatial-temporal remove from each other. An irreducible difference between citing and cited events produces a gap (Briggs and Bauman 1992): therein lies the "newness," a semiotic "excess," in Nakassis's (2012, 633) words and, thus, the potential for the citaton to graft new meanings in context. I'll argue that citational acts like an embodied gesture, when felicitous, are understood as a performance of K-pop-ness (and ideological Koreanness) by replicating behavior associated with the K-pop idol figure. If "signs and sign relations interpellate racialized bodies, subjects, and subjectivities" (Smalls 2020, 242), what are the

signs that interpellate Asian raced bodies? In the ideological absence of Asian bodies, how are they interpellated through the citation of embodied signs?

Method and Theoretical Framework

The data analyzed in this article come from face-to-face and digital ethnographic fieldwork I have conducted with Mexican K-pop fans since 2016. I began online participant observation by following K-pop fan social media accounts on You-Tube, Facebook, and Instagram, and e-mailing and direct messaging them. I also interviewed K-pop fans and attended major K-pop conventions in Mexico City in the summers of 2016 and 2018.

In positing a raciosemiotics of appropriation, I account for the circulation of the characterological figure (Agha 2005) of the female K-pop idol, an object of desire, celebrity, and great admiration among K-pop fans of all genders. Following Park (2021), I analyze the figure in the metapragmatic discourse of K-pop fans, attending to the dimensions of time, space, and affect. While fans' meta-pragmatic discourse does not always make overt reference to this figure, I discuss the clear ways in which this figure is presupposed and entailed. More specifically the female K-pop star as a figure of personhood emerges through (meta) discourse and other metasemiotic processes such as embodied citations and even overt commentary on enregistered features associated with the figure. Analyzing figures of personhood, then, cannot be confined to an examination of isolated texts. Instead, I consider the chain of interdiscursivity—interdiscursively linked texts that provide the contours of the figure (Wortham and Reyes 2020). Thus, the data analyzed here come from a range of sources, including ethnographic interviews, participant observation, interviews, fans' social media, and media assessments of fans from Mexico City.

The K-Pop Industry, Idols, and Fans

K-pop is a globalized musical genre that borrows from hip-hop, Europop, R&B (Anderson 2020), dance music, dubstep, and many other genres but is largely understood and consumed as a multimedia performance that emphasizes the visual as much as—if not more than—the audio (Kim 2018). Thus, music videos and singles are frequently released simultaneously. Part of K-pop's mass appeal is due to the wide range of music it encompasses, its visuality, as well as the Korean entertainment industry's strategies for marketing to ever-shifting patterns of global consumerism (Kim 2013). Since K-pop builds from so many intertextual references, it cannot be said to be a complete departure from recognizable pop genres or embedded globalized references; it is familiar and foreign at the same

time. Indeed, fans frequently discuss how their initial interest in K-pop is due to its newness as well as, counterintuitively, to its encapsulation of multiple genres that were already familiar to them. Crucially, the K-pop industry brands itself as being at the cutting edge of global pop music, which influences fans' understanding of the genre.

Scholars of K-pop agree that given South Korea's historically export-driven economy, K-pop is a kind of musical production that is made explicitly for overseas consumption (Shin 2013; Kim 2018). Indeed, the very label "K-pop" comes to signify an external gaze, even as K-pop largely remains an ideologically Korean product. This dual nature of being of "Korean origin and global destination" defines K-pop while also presenting a kind of identity crisis (Kim 2017, 8). The double orientation of the K-pop industry as simultaneously competing locally and globally is instantiated by its promotional practices: while the original song usually features catchy lyrics in both Korean and English, songs are frequently translated into other languages to be able to compete in regional markets (e.g., in Japan or the United States). Given this aggressive global campaign that K-pop entertainment companies have pursued in recent years, coupled with the ease with which it has circulated via the Internet, K-pop has been able to extend outside of Asia, reaching a scale and recognition unprecedented in Latin America compared to other forms of pop music coming out of Asia.

Choi (2020, 85) argues that K-pop is defined not only in terms of distinct musical characteristics but also by K-pop performers' interactions with Korean and non-Korean audiences in what she calls the "global affective economy"; that is, they are laboring bodies that perform affectively with and for their fans. K-pop is primarily associated with music by artists, called "idols," who are trained, managed, and promoted by South Korean entertainment companies (Choi 2020). K-pop management companies today carefully deliberate on how to package stars in a way that will enthrall the global marketplace. Since the mid-2000s, during what has been called the "second era" or "second wave" of K-pop, the aesthetics of music videos has changed dramatically to deemphasize narrative plots and to accentuate instead the physical beauty and elaborate dance choreographies of idols themselves (Kim 2020). Indeed, around the same period, K-pop entertainment labels began to feature more mixed race, non-Korean, and transnational Korean artists. Music videos are intended to generate the feeling of watching live stage shows (Kim 2018), thereby emphasizing the intimacy established between idols and fans (Choi 2020). This mediatization of intimacy with idols, and especially the enterprise of fan service as described below, has enabled K-pop to reach a large global audience across time and space.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, fans clearly made a distinction between Korean people, with whom they by and large did not interact, and K-pop as a genre they consumed on the Internet. Thus, a one-to-one mapping of their consumption of K-pop (including images of idols) and their social imaginaries of Korean/Asian people is too simplistic. Nonetheless, young Mexican fans of K-pop articulated racial(izing) ideologies vis-à-vis Asians in their local context; at the same time, K-pop fandom became a way by which they distinguished themselves from locally racist ideas about Asian difference. There were, of course, slippages between their characterizations of K-pop idols and their understanding of Korean culture, which is unsurprising, given that K-pop was the primary gateway into Korean culture for many fans. Thus, fans' primary "interaction" with Koreans was through media consumption.

The Characterological Figure of the K-Pop Idol

Like all figures of personhood, the K-pop idol is a figure extrapolated from real life and thus becomes recognizable as a person type. Though the indexical associations of being a K-pop idol span genders, I focus on the characterological type of the female K-pop idol because the K-pop industry has historically produced more female idols and has subsequently spent more resources to promote their images abroad. K-pop fans describe idols as beautiful and physically attractive, using descriptors such as thin (*delgadas*) and fair-skinned (*pálidas*). The industry norms of being trendy and fast-paced also affect indexical associations with idols: they are of-the-moment and hence ephemeral (even if this is not readily admitted by K-pop fans).

Moreover, the concept of fan service has become a mainstay in K-pop, mediating the relationship between fans and idols in recent years. Choi (2020, 7) explains that "a celebrity can perform fan service verbally (e.g., by saying "I love you" to their fans), physically (e.g., by hugging their fans), and/or musically (e.g., by singing a love song to their fans)." Fan service can be performed spontaneously and voluntarily, but fans frequently ask celebrities to perform specific behaviors. In sum, fan service can be any outward-facing embodied-linguistic act performed by idols that is meant to produce a pleasurable affective experience and bond with fans, thereby partially ensuring the longevity of their careers (Choi 2020). While fan service performances constitute a varied display of gendered affects, arguably the most readily recognizable enregistered style is *aegyo*, an enregistered embodied and linguistic style associated with displays of affection, including behaving in a coquettish or cheeky manner, and often glossed as 'cuteness' (Strong 2012; Brown 2013; Moon 2018). Idols are frequently expected to

perform *aegyo* in interactions with fans and in various mediatized events. Moreoever, *aegyo* becomes a topic of metapragmatic commentary by Mexican fans as well as part of their own embodied repertoire, which I discuss below.

Given the expectation of fan service and the ways that digital musical performances are meant to simulate live performances, K-pop idols engage in a kind of intimacy with fans that is part and parcel of the experience of being in a K-pop fandom. Thus, K-pop idols indexically become lovely "intimate laborers" for their fans (Choi 2020, 16). Alongside this illusion of accessibility through performed intimacy, idols are prototypical icons of cosmopolitan cool, given both the worldwide popularity of K-pop and its well-known ability to appropriate from globalized genres, including widely recognizable personae (Kim 2020; Garza 2021).

The cuteness and loveliness performed by K-pop idols through fan service inform the indexical associations with the idol figure as well as the metapragmatic discourses about *aegyo* as a register, thereby encouraging fan adoption/citation of recognizably *aegyo* forms. The characterological figure is also illustrated by the ways that different K-pop stars can go in and out of embodied performance (of *aegyo*, but also sexiness, and other gendered performances) indexical of the idol figure on non-K-pop appearances, such as a TV variety show. Moreover, the idol persona can overlap with other globalized gendered and racialized personae (Garza 2021).

Nearly every K-pop fan I encountered was able to recall their first foray into K-pop, usually through exposure to an idol group. Toño, one of the fans I corresponded with and interviewed, described his first encounter with K-pop:

Transcript 1

1	por lo general eres fan,	in general you're a fan
2	eres fan del Kpop,	you're a fan of K-pop
3	porque te gusta un idol,	because you like an idol
4	y entonces es como,	and so it's like
5	me gusta tal?	I like such
6	por ejemplo,	for example
7	yo lo digo,	I'm telling you
8	porque yo así empecé.	because I started out that way
9	osea,	like
10	cuando vi:,	when I saw
11	el primer video de:,	the first video by
12	de Soshi que fue:,	by Soshi which was
13	Genie?	Genie
14	osea,	like
15	vi a Sooyoung,	I saw Sooyoung
16	y dije,	and I said
17	yo a ella la amo y la voy a amar para siempre.	I love her and I'm gonna love her forever
18	y gracias a ella,	and thanks to her
19	vi todos los demás,	I saw other ones

Transcript 1 (*continued*)

20 y luego vi a más grupos,	and then I saw more groups
21 pero osea ella,	but like she
22 ella me hizo fan de más cosas.	she made me a fan of other things
23 pero casi–	but it almost
24 casi siempre empieza así.	it almost always starts like that
25 osea sabes a uno y ese uno te engancha,	like you get to know one and it hooks you
26 para entrar a ese mundo tan grande.	into entering that big world

He begins with a generalizing statement of how fans' digital encounters with a K-pop idol or group is how most fans enter the K-pop world. Using his own case as an example, he begins to narrate his first encounter with *Soshi*—an insider term used by fans to refer to the K-pop band Girls' Generation, one of the most successful bands of the genre (Epstein 2014). Toño's personalized narrative (starting in line 6), invokes a past chronotope of his first encounter with K-pop through "Genie," Girls' Generation's 2010 hit single. The moment he sees Sooyoung, one of nine core members, marks an affective rupture: he has fallen in love with the idol. He narratively describes the encounter as love at first sight, a well-known poetic structure of heterosexual desire. The chronotope is converted into one of adoration with abandon wherein Toño swears his love to her forever. He continues to credit Sooyoung—and metonymically, the whole of Girls' Generation—for opening the gateway into the broader world of K-pop. Toño moves from his personal narrative to a more general statement, explaining that it just takes one idol to hook you into the expansive world of K-pop (lines 23–26).

As noted above, K-pop fans frequently comment on the diverse genres encapsulated by the term *Kpop* as well as the many talents of idols, who undergo years of training in not only dancing, singing, songwriting, and sometimes rapping, but also acting and modeling. Toño passionately highlights these diverse performance repertoires of his beloved idols:

Transcript 2

1	osea,	like
2	me inspiraba mucho que:,	it inspired me so much that
3	alguien baile y cante.	someone could dance and sing
4	cuando un día descubrí que,	one day when I discover that
5	en el Kpop,	in K-pop
6	pues bailan,	they dance
7	y cantan,	and sing
8	y rapean,	and rap
9	y modelan,	and model
10	y hacen,	and do
11	todo lo que a mí me gusta?	everything that I like

Transcript 2 (*continued*)

12	como que es–	like it's
13	es muy inspirador.	it's very inspiring
14	Kpop.	K-pop

Toño's passionate description captures the musical complexities of K-pop idol groups (which usually feature multiple vocalists and at least one rapping member) as well as the audiovisual format of the genre: K-pop is consumed visually as much as it is consumed aurally. He expresses great admiration for the idol who dances and sings (line 2–3). The chronotope of discovery (line 4) hearkens back to his romantic chronotope of encountering and falling in love with Sooyoung. He also captures how K-pop artists' training involves being able to excel in other career paths such as modeling or acting. Idols perform indexically flexible selves; indeed, their success depends on it (Kim 2020). For Toño, idols encapsulate everything that he finds pleasing: they are multitalented and, thus, inspirational. Later in the same interview, he expresses his appreciation for idols' ability to work so hard for so many years, again alluding to idols' well-known arduous years of training as well as their struggles to remain relevant or in the limelight for more than a few years. Similar sentiments regarding idols' perseverance and work ethic were echoed by many of my interlocutors doing the course of my fieldwork.

Later in the same interview, Toño continues to describe what drew him to Girls' Generation in particular:

Transcript 3

1	y por eso me gusta tanto,	and that's why I like (so much)
2	Girls' Generation,	Girls' Generation
3	porque,	because
4	son como unas Barbie,	they're like Barbies
5	han abarcado muchos géneros,	they've encompassed so many genres
6	y muchos bailes,	and so many dances
7	y muchos conceptos,	and so many concepts
8	por eso me gustan tanto.	that's why I like them so much

Toño offers a glimpse into the visual aesthetics of K-pop and why he finds idols so encaptivating. His likening of the members of Girls' Generation to Barbies (line 4) is an otherworldly comparison, if not a racializing one. In his eyes, the members are perfection embodied—almost too perfect, so as to be practically manufactured (Seabrook 2012). Despite his great admiration for this group, his description echoes racializing descriptions of K-pop idols as all looking the same. He later describes his impression of beauty norms in South Korea by describing

what he understands to be the dominant characteristics of K-pop stars: *pálidas* 'pale', *delgadas* 'thin', *sin trasero* 'without a butt', *sin boobies* 'without boobs', perhaps akin to Barbies. While fans are careful to distinguish K-pop stars from everyday Korean people, such descriptions reveal the slippages between their admiration of K-pop stars—who are known to have restrictive diets and physical alterations of various types—and their understanding of beauty norms for South Korean women. Toño's comments also elucidate the unproblematized aesthetic norms (e.g., a "manufactured" look) that fans may espouse or come to expect of K-pop artists, hinting at embodied perfection as an association fans make with idols. By extrapolation, the idol figure is perfection embodied so as to be otherworldly.

K-Pop as Foreign and Hence Strange

Studies of K-pop fandoms have examined how K-pop consumers understand the genre and its performers to be indexically foreign and racially marked (Min et al. 2019; Yoon et al. 2020). In the United States, for instance, early media coverage of K-pop tended to subject idols to dominant racializing discourses such as being unassimilable and monolingual foreigners (Jung 2013; Kim 2017). Unsurprisingly, to nonfans, the genre is perceived to be youthful, foreign, and hence strange. In their overview of studies that examined the uptake of K-pop in non-Asian contexts, Yoon and colleagues (2020) conclude that K-pop is racialized as a foreign (i.e., non-Western) cultural form. They identify two key ways that the consumption of Korean popular culture is racialized outside of South Korea: media coverage that racializes K-pop idols, and audience uptake of K-pop as a foreign genre that represents a departure from locally available popular culture. Their overview asserts that K-pop and Korean popular culture more broadly is racialized among mainstream audiences in non-Asian countries; thus, K-pop acts as a signifier of an exotic and racialized other (Han 2017; Min 2017).

Two of my interlocutors, Toño and his friend Memo—also a fan of K-pop—metadiscursively echo these racializing sentiments and situate them within the dominant racializing logics vis-à-vis Asians in the Mexican context:

Transcript 4

1 Toño:	lo que pasa es que:,	what happens is
2	en México,	in Mexico
3	la–	the
4	la cultura asiática,	Asian culture
5	está muy,	is really
6 Memo:	orientalizada.	Orientalized
7 Toño:	fetishized.	fetishized

While Toño's use of the term *la cultura asiática* could be interpreted as reifying the idea of a monolithic Asianness, he and Memo both further explain that that which is associated with Asia tends to be exoticized in the Mexican context. In other words, they cite a historical discourse of Orientalism (Said 1979) to critique enduring local dynamics of Asian racialization. Toño's use of the English word *fetishized* is especially noteworthy in this context as it lends a kind of theoretical precision. Rather than functioning as an index of aspirational or situational cosmopolitanism, English is recruited to offer a sharp analysis of the global, intersectional histories and structures that render Asians in Mexico exotic and foreign. In sum, English functions within a multilingual repertoire that fans use to develop a critical apparatus for evaluating social action.

In this way, K-pop fans frequently position themselves as social critics who are more knowledgeable about Korean culture than their peers or elderly counterparts and, crucially, better able to distinguish among Asian cultures. As one fan put it bluntly: "La gente precisamente tiene la idea de que lo asiático es raro" (People just have the idea that whatever is Asian is weird). Toño and Memo explained that for nonparticipants, K-pop in Mexico has come to be associated with and is frequently mistaken for other popular cultural forms coming out of Asia, namely, from Japan. Thus, much to their dismay, K-pop fans are frequently conflated with *weebs*, a pejorative term that refers to fans of Japanese popular culture. This sentiment is corroborated by an online article magazine about K-pop fandom in Mexico published by UNAM, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Alvarado Vargas 2020). While the article discusses global K-pop fandom, it features interviews of young Mexicans, many of whom echo the cultural conflations underscored by my interlocutors:

> Hasta hace poco, las chicas que se identificaban como kpopers solían ser confundidas con la comunidad otaku (de origen japonés) o encasilladas en el problemático concepto de friki, enfrentando todo tipo de actos de discriminación.
> [Until recently, girls who identified as kpopers used to be confused with the otaku community (of Japanese origin) or pigeonholed into the problematic concept of *friki* [weird], facing all kinds of acts of discrimination.]

Otaku is a transliterated Japanese word that refers to a fan of Japanese popular culture. It is also widely considered to have a pejorative connotation, namely, youth who are obsessed with Japanese genres such as manga and anime to the point of being socially withdrawn. This passage captures the conflation of young K-pop fans and fans of Japanese popular culture, a distinction that the general

public is unable to make, according to Mexican K-pop fans. The K-pop industry, however, is unabashedly nationalistic and therefore tends to differentiate itself from popular culture coming out of other Asian nations. Furthermore, K-pop management companies have been shown to reproduce dominant racial ideologies in catering to new markets (Kim 2017). Kim discusses the US crossover attempt of Girls' Generation and argues that "the K-pop industry also reproduced and conformed to Western mainstream media's stereotypes of Asian culture" (13) and especially well-worn Orientalist, misogynistic tropes vis-à-vis female K-pop idols. Yoon and colleagues (2020, 140) argue that in Spain, K-pop is often "stereotyped as an item constituting the racial and cultural repertoire of Asia." Thus, even though fans differentiated among Asian cultures or became more interested in other Korean cultural forms by way of K-pop, their consumption of K-pop cannot be said to be free from hegemonically racializing logics that circulate globally, many of which are deployed by industry actors themselves.

K-Pop and Racial Ideologies in Mexico

If K-pop is far from immune to local processes of racialization when it "moves" across different consumer markets, we must consider the broader racial landscape that K-pop and signs associated with it must traverse. Put differently, what are the indexicals of race in Mexico that K-pop—a "foreign" genre from Korea—encounters? Toño explains the status of race and intraethnic differentiation (or lack thereof) in Mexico:

Transcript 5

1	generalmente,	in general
2	en e:l,	in the
3	imaginario eh–	imaginary um
4	como popular?	like popular
5	si te gusta,	if you like
6	Asia?	Asia
7	generalmente,	in general
8	la verdad es que la gente aquí es muy racista,	the truth is that people here are really racist
9	entonces no distinguen,	so they don't distinguish
10	entre Corea, Japón, y China.	between Korea, Japan, and China
11	pareces lo mismo.	you look the same
12	entonces,	so
13	a mí me pasa mucho que es,	it happens a lot to me that
14	<VOX=PITCH> no a ti te gusta eso de China, no? </>	don't you like that thing from China
15	es como no es China,	it's like it's not China
16	es Corea.	it's Korea
17	y no–	and they don't

Transcript 5 (*continued*)

18 la verdad no les interesa aprender sobre eso.	the truth is they're not interested in learning about that
19 lo ven todo como una gran masa de asiáticos?	they see it all as a one large mass of Asians
20 y entonces que no tiene como relevancia alguna,	and so that has no relevance whatsoever
21 entonces lo que muy poco–	so what really few
22 lo que es muy común,	what's really common is
23 si te gusta algo,	if you like something
24 la gente automáticamente lo invaliden.	people automatically invalidate it

Toño is describing the reception of K-pop in Mexico and its perception by nonfans, situating K-pop within existing racializing logics. His word choice of *el imaginario popular* suggests such racializing ideologies vis-à-vis Asianness are hegemonic. His raised pitch in line 14 makes clear that he is voicing an ignorant compatriot who assumes K-pop is "de China." Double-voicing (Bakhtin 1981), here, not only invokes a type of Mexican national who is ignorant of Asian ethnic difference; it allows Toño to discursively distance himself from this "they" and, accordingly, from indexical associations of being inexorable and provincial. The figure of the ignorant Mexican national who is unable to distinguish ethnic Asians (itself a folk ideology) provides a node of differentiation (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) and a set of indexicals that serve as a semiotic basis for the construction and negotiation of fan identities as being more cosmopolitan, inclusive, and open-minded—and therefore enlightened—when it comes to Asian ethnic difference.

Toño's use of the phrase *una gran masa de asiáticos* hearkens back to hemispheric yellow peril discourses, whereby Asians were racialized as unruly, diseased masses (Lim 2020). Chang (2017) details the parallel discursive construction of the Chinese racial figure in Mexican culture and politics alongside the racial formation of the mestizo by the state at the time of nation building. During the period leading up to the 1910 revolution, Chinese migrants were the second largest immigrant group in Mexico. Thus, anti-Chinese sentiment and policies fomented a racial narrative of alterity wherein Chinese (and ideologically Asian) bodies were framed as racially unfit, unpatriotic, and unassimilable. Combined with the demographic reality of a heterogeneous Indigenous population and the state's ongoing struggle to incorporate them, the Chinese acted as a kind of foil for a preferred kind of mixing and therefore a preferred subject: the abstract racial figure of the mestizo. Thus emerged the dominant national racial ideology that accompanied Mexico's formation as a modern nation: *mestizaje*,

largely understood to be a political ideology and state-sponsored project of Indian incorporation through miscegenation with Spanish settlers to produce a distinctive mestizo race. Chang (2017) argues that a significant effect of anti-Chinese sentiment and policies was the racial transformation of Indigenous populations into mestizos, who were incorporated into the polity in one generation. The dominant national-racial ideology in contemporary Mexico remains *mestizaje*, an incomplete project of Indigenous incorporation that continues to rely on the erasure of ethnic minorities such as Afro-descendants and Asians, thereby allowing everyday race relations in Mexico to operate under the auspices of the pervasive trope of racial innocence (Hernández 2012).

Asian racialization in Mexico has been shown to be conditioned by a hemispheric history of anti-Chinese violence, a history that is largely erased or ignored (Lee 2005; Chang 2017). These histories are consequential not only for Asians who have historically been in Mexico but also for new waves of migrants, "who are greeted by deeply sedimented ideas of Asian racial difference and unassimilability" (Lim 2020, 444). Indeed, many K-pop fans in Mexico City expressed hegemonic notions about the local Korean migrant population as exclusionary and unwilling to assimilate. Moreover, contemporary evidence of the racialization of Asians in Mexico and across Spanish-speaking contexts is the ubiquitous term *chino*, which is not only, or even primarily, an ethnic marker but a racial category carried over from the colonial era (Chang 2017; Lim 2020; Yoon et al. 2020).

As noted above, the ability to "distinguish" between "Corea, Japón, y China" (line 10) is an ideological-discursive move whereby fans differentiate themselves from an ignorant and racist general populace. This increasingly entextualized formulation reifies an East Asian hegemony, that frequently acts as a metonym for the whole of Asia (indeed, note lines 6 and 10). In explaining that "parece lo mismo" (you look the same)—Toño explains how I would be racialized in Mexico—again revealing the slippages between ideological associations with K-pop and racialized Asians in Mexico. In other words, like K-pop, I would be conflated with other Asian people/things. The idea of liking anything to do with Asia (lines 5–6) suggests an openness to foreign genres—again corroborated by the double-voicing of an ignorant compatriot who is dismissive (line 24) and not interested in learning (line 18). Ironically, the indexical foreignness (which was also frequently overtly presenced in discourse) of Asian people and things is itself a racializing discourse given the long history of Asians in Mexico outlined above. Furthermore, K-pop fans in Mexico, by and large, do not interact with ethnic Koreans in Mexico City, and their claims to being able to distinguish

between Asian ethnicities is largely based on their consumption of K-pop (only a few of my participants were fans of J-pop, and none mentioned being fans of Chinese pop music). Thus, fans' ability to "distinguish" suggests a strong orientation to physical and social characteristics associated with the figure of the K-pop idol, rather than everyday ethnic Koreans. Moreover, by positioning themselves as more open to indexical foreignness in contrast to their compatriots, K-pop fans contribute to the formation of an intersubjective group identity that is worldly, open-minded, and inclusive.

Embodying the K-Pop Idol through Social Media

K-pop fans' social media practices elucidate a dispersed, yet collective group formation. Indeed, K-pop fans comprise sophisticated, transnational, networked publics that emerge and mobilize primarily on social media platforms (Garza forthcoming). K-pop fans' networked activities—ranging from individual and group social media posts, promoting idols online, to organizing large in-person events—allow them to enact transnational subjectivities even as they are "constrained" to a physical locale. Some K-pop fans invoke their favorite idols by embodying them online by recreating dance choreography and uploading their recordings on social media platforms. The now global phenomenon of K-pop cover dance is a genre that speaks to the salience—indeed, inextricability—of dance in K-pop. K-pop cover dance groups are made up of fans dedicated to recreating the dance choreography of well-known K-pop bands. Figure 1 shows a 2017 Instagram post by the K-pop cover dance group Guys' Generation, based in Mexico City, commemorating the 10-year anniversary of their favorite K-pop band, Girls' Generation.

The image features the name of the fan group in both English (Guys' Generation) and Korean (*so-nyeon-si-dae* 소년시대). The sizeable Korean text overshadows the English and creates direct indexical links to the K-pop group Girls'

Figure 1. Instagram post of Guys' Generation celebrating Girls' Generation's 10-year anniversary.

Generation, whose Korean name is *so-nyeo-si-dae* (소녀시대). *So-nyeon*, as used by Guys' Generation, means 'young boy', and 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—an iconic (inter)textual resemblance—with Girls' Generation, further corroborated by their embodied styles, detailed below. Borrowing Blommaert's (2010) distinction between emblematic and denotative signs, I argue that the use of Korean script here acts as an emblematic sign that provides additional indexical meaning to their performance and group identity. Put another way, rather than aim to convince members of the counterpublic of a kind of linguistic fluency, the use of Korean functions emblematically, semiotically lending an air of Koreanness. A second-order indexical meaning is created whereby Korean, within this local Mexican context, signifies membership to a broader global K-pop public and semiotically invokes proximity to Koreanness, even if such proximity is aspirational or ideologized.

Furthermore, their matching attire, symmetry of bodily arrangement, and staged poses, alongside the English and Korean text, simulate promotional material or even an album cover. This sartorial display inarguably finds its inspiration in the clothing worn by Girls' Generation in the video for their 2007 debut song "Into the New World" (*da-si man-nan se-gye*), outfits that the K-pop group subsequently recreated in numerous live performances (figs. 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Girls' Generation green and white outfits from music video

Figure 3. Girls' Generation green and white outfits from live performance

Guys' Generation's re-creation of these ensembles cites a momentous event of the past—the 2007 debut of Girls' Generation. In Bakhtinian terms, the embodied citations in this 2017 social media post conjure nostalgic chronotopes of Girls' Generation's earliest days as a group. Since these fans are not, in fact, celebrating their own anniversary, this appropriation of Girls' Generation's 10-year celebration as their own brings together two disparate chronotopic realms, thereby creating direct indexical links between citing and cited events. The Instagram post as a whole acts as a citational homage that invokes the past in the present moment of citation, minimizing the intersemiotic gaps between two timescapes. Indeed, this chronotopic citation evidences Guys' Generation's knowledge of K-pop history as well as their present discursive engagement with a K-pop counterpublic. Guys' Generation is able to graft (Gal 2019) new meaning onto local practices (i.e., authenticating local fan identities) by invoking the characterological figure in a more direct sense.

In sum, this Instagram post calibrates various removed time-spaces in the moment of citation, acting as an homage to a K-pop band's past and future while presently celebrating local fandom through presupposing and embodying idols. Guys' Generation's embodied citation harnesses the power of that which it cites—the global visibility of their beloved idols and their fandom. The K-pop dance cover is a (maximally) explicit citation, meaning it reproduces the cited event with utmost fidelity. In this Instagram post, as in many other embodied citations, the citing and cited events are in iconic relation to one another. While some K-pop fans choose to engage in such overt homages, others frequently

perform enregistered *aegyo* signs such as gestures that recreate an iconic smallness and childlikeness.

Citational acts, repeated over and over, create the conditions for intersubjective identity and community: in sum, a counterpublic. As Smalls (2020) has theorized, the citation of (racialized) signifiers allows one to perform intersubjectivity especially when such signifiers have been enregistered to index a particular social type or model of personhood. The citation of K-pop is a performance that some young Mexicans engage in in order to fashion their very selves, but in the process, their practice creates an interdiscursivity shared by participating fans. Again, as with all cases of citational embodiment, the social media post discussed above is legible only to those familiar with the broader interdiscursive field or chain of signification that allow for a moment of calibration to "make sense."

Some fans articulate how K-pop has contributed to their identity formations at the most intimate of scales. The UNAM article mentioned above quotes Mexican youth who describe the impact K-pop has had on their personal lives (Alvarado Vargas 2020):

> "Con el k-pop he aprendido tanto baile, como canto y dibujo. He logrado una notoria mejoría en entender cómo usar el cuerpo y su fuerza. Me parece fascinante que de esta sola inspiración he podido desarrollar tantas habilidades," cuenta la adolescente, que también aprendió edición de video y lleva dos años estudiando coreano.
> ["With K-pop I have learned as much about dancing as much as singing and drawing. I have made a noticeable improvement in understanding how to use my body and its strength. I find it fascinating that from this single inspiration I have been able to develop so many skills," says the teenager, who also learned video editing and has been studying Korean for two years.]

A common theme among K-pop fans is that K-pop acts as a gateway into other forms of Korean cultural forms, such as learning the language or an interest in cuisine (Yoon et al. 2020)—that is, to enter a capacious new world, as in Toño's "ese mundo tan grande" of K-pop (transcript 1, line 26). Furthermore, this fan describes the many skills and interests she has been able to cultivate as a result of her involvement in K-pop: dance, singing, illustration, and video editing. Her description echoes Toño's (transcript 2) passionate admiration for the many talents of idols. Here we see a lamination of the kinds of skills repertoire that idols are expected to possess onto fans' very embodied awareness. This fan

describes a noticeable difference—an improvement, in fact—of how to use her body and strength. Repetions over time—citations, if you will—have resulted in a phenomenological shift for this fan. By embodying their favorite idols through citational dance performances, K-pop fans suggest an embodied habitus formation that is marked by discipline, control, and strength.

Such reflexive descriptions of embodied habitus formation were echoed by my own participants. Toño, who had started a dance cover group with his friends, wrote an undergraduate thesis detailing and reflecting on his participation in K-pop cover dance. He writes:

> 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.]

This critical reflection underscores the impact of the genre on fans' identity formations. As with all citations, "the performative act doesn't simply transform the context of its performance, it transforms the subjectivity of its participants" (Nakassis 2012, 625). Dance, for Toño, as for the fan quoted in the UNAM article, is not merely a pastime or a profession; it is much more consequential. Toño distinguishes *el baile* from *la danza*, delineating the former—referring to K-pop cover dance—as being more liberating and *danza* as being much more prescriptive vis-à-vis gender norms. I interpret Toño's articulation of *el baile* as phenomenologically feminine—and hence empowering. If cover dance acts as "a performative deconstruction whereby the popularised dances of the K-pop industry are turned into a shared cultural property" (Choi 2014, 112), then each dance token is an opportunity for fans to engage in a type of gendered performance—that of the idol—accruing over time into queer possibilities as expressed by Toño's metacommentary. Insofar as gender is performative (Butler 1990, 1993), Toño's reflection shows that the expression of nonnormative gender has an outlet in the form of dance performance.

While K-pop groups are already marked in the broader landscape of popular culture in Mexico, men's performance of feminized choreography is further marked, both within the broader Mexican public and their local K-pop counterpublic. For many of my male interlocutors, dance acts as a way to approximate

femininity, which is unfathomable in everyday life. Social media receptions to K-pop cover dance in the Mexican context as well as dancers' metapragmatic discourse surrounding their practices elucidate the transgression of locally meaningful categories. For instance, my interlocutors explained to me that online commenters often mock their performance by calling them "Gays' Generation." They also explained there were double standards for men and women performing K-pop dance choreography: women could "get away with" all types of dance, even indexically masculine genres such as hip-hop, while cisgender men could not engage in indexically feminine movements without risking ridicule. By approximating the figure of the female K-pop idol through citational embodiment, male K-pop dancers are frequently interpellated as unruly gendered subjects who dangerously traverse the realm of indexical femininity. If "citational acts can open up new horizons of possibility, signification, and performative power" (Nakassis 2013, 51), therein lies the subversive nature of the vernacularization of K-pop in Mexico: performing K-pop cover dance allows young Mexican men to negotiate gender norms by temporarily embodying a mediatized figure, entailing something new altogether. The acts of repeating and recreating produce semiotic excesses, grafting new meanings onto local practices and shaping fan (inter)subjectivities.

Conclusion: Toward a Raciosemiotics of the Transnational

In this article, I have examined Mexican K-pop fan discourses and performance on social media, focusing on citations of the mediatized figure of the K-pop idol: a desirable, aspirational racial other. In analyzing how fans understand their practices, I have suggested that K-pop fans engage in a kind of metonymic transfer from their love for K-pop onto perceptions of Koreanness and Asianness more broadly. Crucially, the characterological figure is shaped by, and must interact with, local racial ideologies; thus, my reading of K-pop fan practices attends to the sociohistorical specificities of Asian racialization in the context of Mexico. K-pop becomes a way for fans to assert new subjectivities based on metasemiotic articulations of fan difference, namely, as open-minded and inclusive. Furthermore, my analysis shows that fans appropriate the figure of the K-pop idol to fashion their own counterpublic identities, resulting in profound effects for young Mexicans ranging from neoliberal subjectivities to queer worldmaking.

A raciosemiotics of the transnational must account for notions like "appropriation" that eschew facile notions of power that flatten historical realities or sociocultural specificities. Moreover, examination of the transnational must

resist prioritizing institutional logics and instead, also investigate local contestations of those logics. I have suggested that by studying appropriation as citation while accounting for situated meanings, we might better understand how globalized forms are engaged locally and how such engagements contribute to changes in local meanings. This study has considered the sociohistorical forces that structure uneven processes of racialization, affective attachments, and cosmopolitan desires while also accounting for the emergent meanings inherent to acts of citation. In taking a historicized semiotic approach, I hope to have contributed to an understanding of transnational racialization that is not divorced from—but resists overdetermined notions of—racialized bodies.

Appendix

The following symbols used in the transcripts are adapted from Dubois (2015):

Continuing intonation	,
Final intonation	.
Appeal intonation	?
Truncated intonation unit	–
Prosodic lengthening	:
<VOX=PITCH> </>	Voice of another, specified for change in pitch

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