

**MUSIC AND HUMAN MOBILITY  
REDEFINING COMMUNITY IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT 2016**

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***BORDERS, WHAT’S UP WITH THAT?: MUSICAL ENCOUNTERS AND  
TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY IN K-POP***

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***Abstract:** The question of music and identity is sitting at the core of ethnomusicological studies about globalization. At this juncture, migrants play a significant role in negotiating processes of musical encounter and exchange and also in yielding new musical genres. They often hold a key position as ‘cultural brokers’ at best acting as symbols of successful social integration (e.g., as ‘model minorities’) and at the same time signaling the shifting boundaries of discourses about nationality and ethnicity. In the realm of contemporary South Korean idol pop music, also known as K-Pop, second and third generation overseas Koreans have been increasingly flowing back to their ‘home country’ since the early 1990s to work in the music industry. Due to localization strategies in recent K-pop music production and growing K-Pop fandom around the globe, more and more foreigners have also been intruding into the domestic star system. By capitalizing their specific status as cultural brokers, immigrant K-Pop idols enjoy transnational stardom and are part and parcel of the industry’s ‘globalization’ activities. But they can also easily fall prey to othering inclinations unleashed through the K-Pop specific star production system or by hyperbolic patriotism of the public. The paper highlights the productive intersections of music studies and globalization theories and sheds light on the multiple entanglements of K-pop stardom, transnational mobility, identity politics, nationalism, and transnational consumption. These will be illustrated with examples taken from recent field research in South Korea and Germany.*

***Keywords:** music, human migration, community, intercultural context, communication*

**1. INTRODUCTION: MUSIC AND  
TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY**

The intricate relationship between music and human mobility has pervaded ethnomusicological thinking from its earliest stages. Borrowed from cultural anthropology, conceptual models of cultural evolutionism and diffusionism have provided the paradigms for comparative musicologists in the early stages of the discipline to explain the spread and transformation of music cultures. Until the late 20th century, anthropology and the social sciences have principally considered culture and society in fixed spatial terms, which put much emphasis on theoretical consideration of societal relationships bounded within territorial and political entities, such as the nation-state. Mobility and travel were mostly grasped as by-products and extensions of the ‘bounded society’ that appeared chiefly static as being mapped onto more or less clearly identifiable and fixed local places. Since the 1960s, anthropologists have

become more reflective of the relationships between culture and social change by drawing on neo-Marxist, feminist, postmodern and postcolonial critiques. They re-evaluated ethnographic knowledge production and challenged the long-standing notions of spatially fixed cultures in academic studies, in which “roots always precede routes” (Clifford, 1997: 3), as James Clifford famously put it in his 1997 book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. In his introductory chapter, Clifford notes:

Virtually everywhere one looks, the processes of human movement and encounter are long-established and complex. Cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things (Clifford, 1997: 7).

With the end of the Cold War, the effects of globalized capitalism, new technologies, and mass

migration have enforced and accelerated our need for thinking about movement, travel, transport, and mobility. A decade ago, the two British sociologists Mimi Sheller and John Urry called for a new mobilities paradigm in the social sciences. In the opening sentence of their influential article, they state:

All the world seems to be on the move. Asylum seekers, international students, terrorists, members of diasporas, holidaymakers, business people, sports stars, refugees, backpackers, commuters, the early retired, young mobile professionals, prostitutes, armed forces – these and many others fill the world’s airports, buses, ships, and trains. The scale of this travelling is immense (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 207).

It is apparent that musicians, music actors and music scholars can be easily added to this list and that the overall dynamics have rather intensified than decreased since the time of their writing. Scholars of cultural globalization have reflected on the transnational nature of many of today’s cultural phenomena and suggested more flexible approaches to the understanding of culture and locality. Arjun Appadurai made a useful suggestion for analyzing global music by hinting towards the dual structure that is characteristic to many cultural forms. He notes:

Thus the twenty-first century is witnessing new tensions between the actually circulating, cultural forms, and emerging, partially culturally formed circuits or networks that shape and cover the multiple paths of circulation. This dual structure of global cultural forms also generates what we may call the ‘bumps’ or obstacles in regard to many cultural flows (Appadurai, 2010: 8).

Recent ethnomusicological studies have increasingly addressed the connections between local and global musical forms by analyzing the mixing and appropriation of different musical styles. However, as Bob W. White notes,

relatively little scholarship has focused on the actual encounters - the chance meetings, coordinated misunderstandings, and ongoing collaborations - that bring people of different musical or cultural backgrounds together or the ways that these encounters condition musical practice and knowledge about the world. (White, 2012: 6).

Migrants play a significant role in negotiating processes of musical encounter and exchange and also in yielding new musical genres. They often hold a key position as ‘cultural brokers’ at best acting as symbols of successful social integration (e.g., as ‘model minorities’) and at the same time

signaling the shifting boundaries of discourses about nationality and ethnicity.

## 2. POP MUSIC FLOWS: MIGRANTS IN SOUTH KOREAN IDOL POP (K-POP)

During the past two decades, South Korean idol pop music, recently dubbed as K-Pop, has steadily increased its popularity among international audiences. From riding the Korean Wave (i.e., the success of Korean TV dramas, movies, and pop songs in East and Southeast Asia) since the late 1990s and boosted by PSY’s YouTube hit “Gangnam Style” in 2012, K-Pop has not only come to indicate a new genre in the global music market, but also to mark a unique cultural phenomenon, which epitomizes South Korea’s engagement with late modernity and globalization. Most characteristic to K-Pop are boy and girl groups, which are designed, groomed, and marketed as “all-round entertainers” to domestic and foreign audiences by South Korean entertainment companies. Featured in stylish music videos with seemingly immaculate faces and figures, fancy costumes and hairdos, rapid dance beats, catchy sing-along tunes, and perfectly synchronized dance routines, K-Pop idols have enthralled a growing fan base across many parts of the world with digital technologies and social media.

Immigrant idols play a pivotal role in K-Pop’s success story, as they serve as precious poster boys and girls of the Korean music industry’s export-oriented business agenda. We can broadly distinguish three groups of immigrant pop idols, corresponding to subsequent globalization strategies, in contemporary K-Pop business: Korean-Americans, foreign nationals with other Asian migratory background, and most recently non-Asian foreign nationals.

The influx of Korean-American immigrants to the music and entertainment sector dates back to the early-mid 1990s, as a response to the rising demand of manpower and knowhow from the new youth culture industry. Young overseas ethnic Koreans raised in the United States and endowed with “cosmopolitan sensibility and linguistic and musical versatilities” (Lee, 2003: 9) were pulled into the Korean music business as idol trainees, song writers, producers, sound engineers, etc. and thus have highly contributed to the further development of K-Pop.

A second group of immigrant K-Pop idols consists of foreign nationals of non-Korean ethnicity. Since the mid-2000s, Korean entertainment companies began to foster their market expansion toward the Chinese and Southeast Asian regions by recruiting idol aspirants from those

countries, e.g. through auditions held in China. By incorporating 'improved localization strategies' into their idol production system (i.e., promising artists are casted abroad, trained in Korea, and 'sold back' to the foreign target market), Korean entertainment companies have successfully expanded sales markets and increased their export rates. As a result, all-purpose serving, highly diversified, flexible, and multi-lingual K-Pop groups have entered the scene, such as thirteen-member-group Super Junior and EXO M and EXO K ('M' standing for Mandarin, 'K' for Korean).

The third type of foreign K-Pop idols is preliminary and limited to the recent and loose attempts by entertainment companies of including 'non-Asian'-looking idols into K-Pop groups. Spurred by the emerging global fandom of K-Pop in the early 2010s and the industry's desire to expand markets beyond the Asian hemispheres, K-Pop producers have started to integrate Caucasian- and African-looking members into K-Pop groups. For example, the Korean-Canadian boy group ESQ featured one Italian member, and the four-member girl group The Gloss featured one French member. Both groups were formed in 2011 and 2012, but already disbanded before their official debuts. In November 2015, the six-member girl group Rania presented an African-American member as a novelty in the K-Pop idol cast. The five-member boy group EXP takes the idea of casting foreigners a step further by representing a K-Pop group without any Korean members. Launched in 2015 by a New York-based team of interdisciplinary artists, the group features a multiethnic cast with one member from each continent. What started as an arts and documentation project on the Korean boy group phenomenon has turned into a potential business enterprise with critical academic undertones drawing attention from mainstream media and K-Pop fans.

These recent attempts to include non-Asian foreigners into the cast of K-Pop idol groups have been very critically assessed by loyal K-Pop fan communities. Even though they are still small in numbers, foreign K-Pop idols serve as a valuable site for further study because they are presented as economically successful examples of the industry's globalization strategy and at the same time they serve as pivotal markers in the public's changing perception of Korea, as they stir debates about the adequate representation of Korean national identity (Fuhr 2016, Lee 2003).

### **3. THE K-POP "SLAVE CONTRACT" AND INDUSTRY CONFLICT**

The transnational human traffic from and to the K-Pop music industry has increased extensively in

the last years. The latest westward initiative of Korean entertainment companies has not only triggered new mobilities, as exemplified most prominently in the shifting strategies of idol recruitment, but it has also brought to the fore the borders, by which the same mobilities are hampered.

On the one hand, a number of aspects have enabled, intensified, and accelerated the flow of people on the part of the Korean entertainment companies (i.e., export-oriented business, localization strategies, the expansion beyond Asian markets, collaboration and networks with international partners). Here it is also notable that the rising K-Pop fandom in many countries around the world, triggered by social media, has yielded stronger interest among non-Asian audiences in K-Pop. Young K-Pop fans outside Asia are however not interested only in consuming K-Pop, but some of them also aim at entering the idol training system in Korea. Global auditions offered by the big entertainment companies have revealed that non-Asian foreigners made forty to seventy percent of the total number of participants (Limb 2012).

On the other hand, a bundle of industrial, legal, and cultural standards, regulations, and peculiarities severely impede the inflow of foreigners. For example, the demanding various skills and expected willingness to conform to industry standards deter many foreign idol wannabes from seriously pursuing a career in the Korean music business, which appears to them as a relatively closed industry with racist, patriarchic, self-contained, and protectionist structures. This becomes most evident in the K-Pop producers' preferences for ethnic Koreans and Asians who conform to the narrowly defined and standardized heteronormative beauty ideals (i.e., slim bodies, fair-skin, muscled-torso for male, long legs for female etc.) and who are willing to acquire Korean and other language skills, Confucianist behavioral codes, such as filial piety, and to submit themselves to the rigid learning culture characteristic to the education system in Korea.

Furthermore, Korean entertainment companies need to solve legal and administrative issues relating to visa and work permits, if they hire foreigners, but here the most crucial problem is again a cultural one, related to the fact that idol aspirants are mostly underage. Whereas Korean parents may be proud to support their offspring in entering the "global dreams factory" (Ho, 2012), more liberal parents of foreign youngsters in Western societies may prevent their kids from becoming a K-Pop apprentice. Jana, a 22-year-old German K-Pop fan and idol wannabe, who had

joined several K-Pop auditions in and outside Korea, reflects on that issue. She noted: “Korean companies don’t want to and don’t know how to negotiate the trainee contract and the conditions with foreign parents, as trainees are underage.” (pers. comm., 30.01.2016).

The idol trainee contract, which has become known as ‘slave contract’ (Han 2009), allows the entertainment company for the overall sculpting and reconfiguration of the trainee’s bodily and mental constitution. Based on radical restrictions of the trainee’s personal life and environment, the idol training system appears as particularly alienating to those who are not familiar with the business standards of Korean entertainment culture. Thus, in-house training usually can vary between two and eight years and demands various mentally and physically enduring skills realized through: extremely long training hours (i.e., 12-16 hours per day) and only few sleeping hours (c.5 hours per night); the expulsion of leisure time; the trainee’s displacement and disconnectedness from his or her relatives and friends; prohibition of private money, cellphone, goods; their willingness to conform to behavioural rules supported by ‘personality education’ (*inseong gyooyuk*); the physical enhancement and beautifying measures including cosmetics, diets, plastic surgeries; etc.

Given the power imbalance between the different parties in the K-Pop supply chain, idol trainees and idols usually do not only have any say about the final product, but they also get the smallest share of the overall revenue stream (Oh 2012). Unfair contracts at the expense of underage teenage apprentices along with the highly competitive education system and labor market in South Korea have become a subject of critical debates in domestic and international media and they appear as severe impediments to the expansionist ‘globalization’ agenda of the K-Pop industry.

#### 4. K-POP FANDOM AND CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES IN GERMANY

K-Pop in Germany is mainly a phenomenon based on local fan culture, instead of being planned and driven by entertainment companies or governmental bodies in South Korea. While the music industry’s interest in launching K-Pop idols in the European market has yet remained poor and German mainstream media coverage of K-Pop (with the exception of PSY’s “Gangnam Style” hit song) has nearly been inexistent, K-Pop is driven by avid fans, who play multiple roles as producers, performers, providers, promoters, critics, and consumers of their self-made K-Pop related

cultural products and practices. They act as creative agents in their own cultural environments, by celebrating their fan cultural activities as much as the original K-Pop idols, and by boosting K-Pop’s popularity along with their interest in Korea-related topics within their social communities and, at times, as well as toward the wider public.

K-Pop fandom in Germany is largely based on “grassroots intermediaries,” who according to Henry Jenkins “play a central role in shaping the reception of those media products, emphasizing rather than erasing the marks of their national origin and educating others about the cultural traditions they embody” (Jenkins 2006: 162). By the same token, K-Pop fans appear as digitally empowered consumers, who actively engage in participatory cultural activities with and around the original audiovisual products. While appropriating the original styles (i.e., music, dance, fashion, look, etc.) and incorporating them into their own personal and cultural contexts, they re-mold the K-Pop products and their allegedly intended meanings into something new, a re-produced object that can be utilized for their own identity-making processes and personal aspirations and alignments in their everyday practices. By doing so, K-Pop fans operate as cultural brokers who are compelled by their respective social contexts to negotiate issues of nationality, ethnicity, or gender with people in their private or public surroundings.

An estimated eighty to ninety percent of K-Pop fans in Germany are female teenagers and twenty-somethings. Most of them are high-school students and graduates, university students, job seekers, job starters, trainees, or workers, many of whom are employed in the service, cultural, and welfare sectors. In terms of social class and ethnicity, it can be suggested that there are two groups of nearly the same size. Whereas one group consists of white educated middle-class Germans, the other group is made up of lower-class persons with a migratory background, being in particular of Asian, African or Turkish descent (since the Turkish migrant community is the biggest ethnic minority in Germany). Yet, among those fans with foreign and migratory backgrounds, it seems that many of them derive from families who came from East and Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Thailand, the Philipines, Japan, and the Chinese-speaking areas, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the PRC.

The most striking aspect in regard of ethnicity is the fact that active K-Pop fans are hardly ever of Korean ethnicity and thus, for example, members of the Korean diasporic community in Germany. If they are involved in K-Pop fan activities they are

not mere consumers, but almost always serve the function of “cultural intermediaries”—a term that, by referencing Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘new petite bourgeoisie,’ seeks to put “emphasis on those workers who come in-between creative artists and consumers (or more generally, production and consumption)” (Negus 2002, 503). Within the emergent cultural economy of K-Pop fandom, ethnic Koreans in Germany range at the top, for not only being considered by non-Korean fans as authentic representatives and experts of Korean culture, but also for capitalizing on the local K-Pop buzz by launching their own business endeavors. Beyond those ‘grassroots intermediaries’ who started as fans and turned into active promoters and providers of K-Pop, Koreans rather tend to position themselves as ‘small-scale entrepreneurs’ in the field of local K-Pop fan culture.

Helena Kwon, a 29-year-old K-Pop dance instructor, illustrates the case. A former K-Pop idol trainee and background dancer for several high-profile K-Pop groups, Helena has recently engaged herself with the German K-Pop fan scene by offering regular K-Pop dance lessons and events in Cologne. Since 2015, she has served as a jury member to the German audition of the annual K-Pop World Festival hosted by the South Korean Consulate in Hamburg. Born to Korean parents in Germany, Helena has spent longer periods of her childhood and teenage years in Korea and in Germany. After dropping out from high school, she embarked on a career as a professional dancer and eventually entered one of the top Korean entertainment companies as a K-Pop idol trainee. She joined the K-Pop apprenticeship system for two years, but then retreated from it, due to the painstaking and alienating character of the training model. She recalls her decision of quitting the training system as follows:

To be honest, I didn’t know whether it was the right thing to do for me and whether I really wanted that. Actually, my dream was to become a dancer, not a star or a singer. That was really a dilemma for me. ‘Is that really what I wanted to do and can I endure such a training?’ And I knew I could not! Because I felt that I was losing my identity, I felt like a robot. I only ate what they gave me. I did all the training hours and what was scheduled and I wasn’t allowed to do something privately. Even during the training, when I had to go to the toilettes, I had to ask for permission. Thus, I eventually I became scared of loosing myself. So I asked myself: Was this really my dream? And then my decision was clear: No! I rather want to be a dancer than an idol (pers. comm., 31.01.2016).

Helena felt that it was due to her German education that the idol training was harder for her than for her fellows, who were raised in Korea. She added:

I’m naturally a Korean, since I have Korean blood in me, but since I spent my childhood in Germany, I would say, my personality is fifty percent German and fifty percent Korean. And that gave me a really hard time, because I was always thinking like: ‘Why do I have to do such a thing?’ Why wasn’t there anyone who explained to me why we had to do this and that? Well, I always had a lot of questions? And the other trainees, the Koreans only were like: ‘We just have to do it. “That’s it! And I was always asking: ‘But why? Why?’(ibid.).

Although she abandoned her idol aspirations, she still upholds many contacts within the K-Pop industry. Her networks and personal insights into K-Pop idol production helped her to turn her negative experiences as an idol trainee—and what she considered a cultural/educational gap—into a productive business idea. In 2016, she launched her own entertainment company, named NET Entertainment. Located in Bonn, the former capital city of West Germany, her company seeks to recruit German dance talents for the Korean market by offering K-Pop dance classes, workshops, events, and cultural exchange services to German K-Pop aficionados. Helena reveals her business plan as follows:

I want to adopt and implement fifty percent of the Korean apprenticeship system in Germany, so that people joining my dance lessons can get familiar with it. [...] So that they can get an idea how it looks like. And later, when they go to Korea they will be used to it, and they will be able to just continue with the training. Otherwise, if they don’t know anything about it and they would be just joining the Korean system out of the blue, they will get a big shock! (ibid.).

Helena deliberately positions herself and her company as a cultural intermediary between the K-Pop fan scene in Germany and the idol industry in South Korea. Since she aims to build a bridge between Korean and German culture, to promote knowledge about Korea among Germans, to prepare German teens for dance auditions in Korea, and to launch and organize a smooth transition between German and Korean working ethics and systems. Helena’s example illustrates that ethnic Koreans often serve the function of cultural brokers in K-Pop fandom by capitalizing on their expertise and knowledge about Korean culture, language, and the entertainment industry.

## 5. CONCLUSION: STUDYING FLOWS AND BORDERS

Music and human mobility have ever since been two closely intertwined phenomena. The high interdependency between them continues to be a core subject in ethnomusicological studies. In the wake of the new mobilities paradigm and (post-) globalization theories in the humanities and social sciences, migrants in transnational popular music have become a productive site for inquiry in ethnomusicology, into the dynamics of musical flows and borders. Looking at the case of K-Pop and its local fandom in Germany, we can draw four conclusive aspects of broader significance to the themes of human mobility and music. First, transnational migration and new technologies intersect with each other and spur new forms of music. In the K-Pop industry, the number of ‘foreigners’ has not only steadily increased since the 1990s, but immigrant idols have also come to play a pivotal role in the formation of the genre. Second, the flow of immigrant artists and musicians is always uneven: in number, but also in terms of origin and impact. Foreign K-Pop idols from the USA, China, and Southeast Asia have illustrated issues of unequal perception and shifting dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the industry and in the wider Korean public. Furthermore, new mobilities create their own boundaries and conflicts. This has been the case with the recent global outreach of K-Pop recruitment, which is hampered by conflicting agendas within the industry (relating to the ‘slave contract’). Third, transnational flows of music do not dissolve discourses of ethnicity and nationality. In the case of K-Pop, it is vice versa, questions of ethnic and national identity have increasingly been emphasized in debates and discourses of idol production and consumption. Last, diasporic artists and musicians are likely to position themselves as cultural intermediaries, who carve out niche spaces in the market by capitalizing on their specific bi-cultural skills and experiences. As discussed, Helena Kwon occupies this zone of cultural intermediation between German K-Pop fandom and the Korean K-Pop industry. Her activities as a cultural broker draw from a rich array of diverse cultural competences, practices, and sensibilities, paired with great personal enthusiasm and

flexibility, all of which are typical qualities that migrants are ready to share within the new social environments they are living in.

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