WHAT'S IN A (STAGE) NAME? PUBLIC PERSONAS, PRIVATE SELVES, AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF AUTHENTICITY

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The K-pop star often goes by two names: the stage name and "real" name. On the Archive of Our Own, a major fan fiction repository, the tags are designed to facilitate searches for either name. Given that the common practice among K-pop fan fiction writers is to use the "real" name, this paper asks how a specific examination of the stage name in the K-pop medium might redefine the relationship between the stage name and the real name in celebrity discourse. To this end, this paper compares two different constructions of the celebrity text: one constructed by the K-pop industry through reality television and one constructed by fan fiction writers reflecting upon their own craft. This paper argues in favor of a connection between these constructions: namely, that the K-pop industry and K-pop fan fiction are both premised on the construction of a dichotomy between the public person and the private self that is performatively transgressed in order to generate an affect that cannot be evoked by either the public or the private alone. The paper concludes by suggesting that these transgressions point toward a new model of celebrity as embodied by the K-pop idol: not a static "persona" but a dynamic negotiation between the "very-much-public" and the "not-so-public."

What is "Real Person Fiction" (RPF)?

Every year, Tumblr — a microblogging platform and social networking site that Morimoto and Stein define as the "main locus of online fandom activity"[1] — puts out a "Fandometrics" report, a compilation of the most popular topics discussed on the platform that year. In 2015, this report declared that "Larry Stylinson," a portmanteau

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1   Lori Morimoto and Louisa Ellen Stein, "Tumblr and Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 27, http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1580.

of the names of One Direction members Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, was "the number one 'ship' [relationship] on the site."[2] Between 2016 and 2017, Fandometrics reported that the amount of fan fiction about K-pop stars on Tumblr had gone up by ten percent.[3] In 2018, "Jikook", a portmanteau of Jimin and Jungkook, members of the K-pop boy band BTS, was one of the top five most popular ships on Tumblr.[4] Of the top 100 ships that year, seventeen were pairings between real-life people of which more than half were related to K-pop. At time of writing, the "K-pop" tag had 273,830 works on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), a "noncommercial and non-profit central hosting place for fanworks" and a major destination for posting and reading fan fiction.[5] These are examples of the phenomenon known as "real person fiction," a genre of fan fiction that writes about "actual people, rather than fictional characters."[6] It has historically been a controversial practice even within fan fiction communities. Just thirteen years before "Larry Stylinson" became the most popular "ship" on Tumblr, Fanfiction.net banned all fan works about real people from its platform.[7] In the 2013 interview that accompanied the twentieth anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, an ethnographic text on fans and fan practices, author Henry Jenkins commented that he "was asked not to write about real person slash"[8] by his subjects while he was working on the book. In her 2018 *Medium* article on RPF, Tonya Riley wrote that the genre continues to raise "murky questions of consent and ownership of public identity."[9] A Reddit thread from the same year, titled "RPF's (Real Person Fics): How Do You Really Feel?", gives some examples of the common questions raised about the issue: Is it just creepy? Is it an invasion of privacy? Is it something you would want someone to do about you (and does that matter)? Is RPF different from simply fantasizing about celebrities in private? What if the celebrity sees it? Can they ask you to stop? Is there a fundamental difference between "real" celebrities and fictional characters? Is RPF a form of obsession? A form of stalking? Is it dehumanizing?[10]

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2   Tonya Riley, "The Dubious Ethics of 'Real-Person Fiction,'" *Medium*, January 12, 2018, https://medium.com/s/darkish-web/the-dubious-ethics-of-real-person-fiction-5cd6b-d498c16.

3   Riley, "Dubious Ethics."

4   "2018's Top Ships," Fandom on Tumblr, November 28, 2018, https://fandom.tum-blr.com/post/180587157919/2018-ships.

5   "About the OTW," Archive of Our Own, accessed May 9, 2019, https://archiveofou-rown.org/about.

6   "RPF," Fanlore, accessed May 17, 2019, https://fanlore.org/wiki/RPF.

7   Riley, "Dubious Ethics."

8   Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture.* Up-dated 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), xxxiii.

9   Riley, "Dubious Ethics."

10   LadyFangs, "RPF's (Real Person Fics): How Do You Really Feel?", *r/Fanfiction* Reddit thread, September 26, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/FanFiction/comments/72mv40/rpfs_real_person_fics_how_do_you_really_feel.

An example of such "real person fiction" in the K-pop medium is "In the Territory of the Dragon King," by Archive of Our Own (AO3) user curledupkitten (*chanyeol*).[11] This fan fiction work focuses on the relationship between two members of the K-pop boy band EXO: "Byun Baekhyun/Do Kyungsoo | D.O." In fact, this is the work's only tag. The "tag" is a function of AO3, a major fan fiction repository, which allows creators to optimize their work for the archive's search engine by appending character names, common tropes, or content warnings.[12] The sole tag for "In the Territory of the Dragon King" is a relationship tag. Anyone looking for fanfiction works about the relationship between EXO members Baekhyun and D.O. can use this tag to facilitate their search. The tag "Byun Baekhyun/Do Kyungsoo | D.O." has a notable punctuative characteristic. The second name, Do Kyungsoo, is connected via a vertical bar to the name D.O., which refers to the fact that the EXO member known as D.O. has two names: D.O., a stage name based on his surname of Do, and Do Kyungsoo. What should we call this second name? His given name? His legal name? His real name? If we call it a "real" name, does this mean that the stage name, and by extension the stage persona, is not real? What does that signify for "real person fiction"?

"In the Territory of the Dragon King" is an "alternate universe" work that reimagines the EXO members as characters in a world where EXO, a massively popular K-pop boy band, does not exist. Instead, the EXO members are given new backstories: Baekhyun runs a small inn on Jeju Island, inherited from his grandmother, and Kyungsoo is a businessman from Seoul who comes to visit.[13] The cast of characters is not limited to EXO members, but is drawn from a wide variety of K-pop idol groups, all of whom are referred to by their "real" names. This is a common practice in writing RPF fanfiction, particularly in K-pop, where many idols use stage names. The AO3 tags have been designed to facilitate searches for both the "stage name" and the "real name" hence, the vertical bar in "Do Kyungsoo | D.O." Why do K-pop fan fiction writers consistently use the "real name," while simultaneously claiming that they do not transgress upon celebrities' "real selves?"[14] In this paper, through a comparison of two different constructions of the celebrity text – one constructed by the K-pop industry through reality television and one constructed by fan fiction writers reflecting upon their own craft – I argue that while both the K-pop industry and K-pop RPF are premised upon the dichotomy between the public persona and the private self, both performatively transgress that dichotomy to generate an affect that cannot be evoked by either the public or the private alone. On one hand, K-pop RPF relies on the theoretical divide between the

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11   Curledupkitten [chanyeol], "In the Territory of the Dragon King," *Archive of Our Own*, May 17, 2014, https://archiveofourown.org/works/2160063/chapters/4722243.

12   "Archive FAQ," Archive of Our Own, accessed November 24, 2019. https://archive-ofourown.org/faq/tags?language_id=en#whatisatag.

13   Curledupkitten (chanyeol), "In the Territory of the Dragon King."

14   Grisclair, "RPS, Slash, and K-Pop: 3 Great Tastes that Taste Great Together! Or Something," LiveJournal post, May 29, 2012, https://grisclair.livejournal.com/77953.html.

public persona and the private self in order to justify its own existence even as its practices threaten any such clear-cut divide. On the other hand, the K-pop industry constructs this public/private dichotomy *in order to* transgress upon it in the pursuit of authenticity, and that it is this authenticity that fans are seeking when they speak of the "real." I conclude by suggesting that these transgressions point toward a new model of celebrity as embodied by the K-pop idol: not a persona, a mask or stage name to be removed at will, but a constant negotiation between the very-much-public and the not-so-public.

Background on Stage Names

On the English-language Korean entertainment news website *Soompi*, Azra_A describes stage names as "a fun K-pop tradition where performers go by an alias that adds an extra dimension to how we see them."[15] For example, in EXO, Suho is a stage name that refers to the idol's position as leader of the group, as the word "*suho*" in Korean also means "to protect." Idols can change their stage names throughout their career – both GOT7 member Junior (now Jinyoung)[16] and BTS member Rap Monster (now RM)[17] changed their stage names, but the close association between the initial stage name and the K-pop idol can be hard to break. For instance, all the EXO members still go by their original stage names, even if the reasoning behind those names no longer exists. For example, in 2019, EXO's Chen released two solo albums under the name "Chen" despite the fact that it has been many years since he was promoted as part of the subunit EXO-M.[18] EXO-M was a subunit of EXO, based in China, that sang in Mandarin, and Chen's stage name was deliberately designed to reflect his membership in that group despite the fact that he neither identifies as Chinese nor speaks Mandarin natively.[19]

Situating the K-pop idol within the broader context of celebrity studies necessitates looking at three different bodies of research: film stars, TV celebrities, and music celebrities. This is primarily due to the multimodal nature of K-pop. Although K-pop is broadly understood "as an abbreviation for Korean popular music," Suk-

15   Azra_A, "12 K-Pop Idols with Unique and Meaningful Stage Names," *Soompi*, August 22, 2019, https://www.soompi.com/article/1347136wpp/12-k-pop-idols-with-unique-and-meaningful-stage-names.

16   J.K, "GOT7's Junior Announces He'll Be Using Real Name from Now On," *Soompi*, August 16, 2016, https://www.soompi.com/article/887297wpp/got7s-junior-announces-hell-using-real-name-now.

17   J.K, "BTS's RM Officially Announces Change to Stage Name," *Soompi*, November 13, 2017, https://www.soompi.com/article/1076975wpp/btss-rm-officially-announces-change-stage-name.

18   Gim Minji, *News1*, August 29, 2019, https://n.news.naver.com/entertain/article/421/0004169282.

19   Marggee, "EXO Member Profile and Facts: Chen," Wordpress post, July 2, 2017, https://bloggingdiscover.wordpress.com/2017/07/02/exo-member-profile-and-facts-chen/.

Young Kim points out that "K-pop is a music scene whose Korean origin and global destination constantly vie to define its identity."[20] Kim embraces the "generative" potential of this identity crisis by suggesting other possible meanings for the "K" in K-pop, such as "kaleidoscopic," "keyboard/keypad," "Kleenex," and "korporate." It is the "kaleidoscopic" term that I seize upon here to describe K-pop's place at the confluence of film and music. Kim writes that "kaleidoscopic pop leads to the crucial concept of multimedia… first as multiple forms of performance, combining acting, singing, dancing, and talk shows to create a complex array of multimedia performances rather than just a music genre."[21] The K-pop star must be understood not only as a music celebrity, but also as someone who embodies what Kim calls "spectacular visuality, which includes good looks, a unique fashion statement, and dance moves."[22] P. David Marshall also points out the element of visuality present among music celebrities outside of the K-pop context: "the presentation of the star, his or her music roots, style of dress, manner of speech, and public display of sexuality are all significant markers for the structuring and differentiating of youth culture."[23] Given this kaleidoscopic confluence, the following section considers stage names in all three contexts (film, TV, and music) before looking at stage names in K-pop proper.

Stage names are mentioned briefly in Richard Dyer's book *Stars*, a film studies text that looks at the development and significance of stardom in Hollywood. Dyer mentions that John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe used stage names while Jane Fonda and Robert Redford did not. He attributes this difference to cinema becoming increasingly "character-oriented," a term that he borrows from literary scholars who characterize novelistic literature as moving away from "emblematic" characters to "particularized" characters.[24] Dyer also notes that "names can be foregrounded in relation to identity… it is very common for people to speak of a character in a film as having the star's name."[25] Here, Dyer discusses the conflation of the film star with their onscreen character, which in his view obscures the original "constructed-ness" of the film star:

> *Stars are, like characters in stories, representations of people… However, unlike characters in stories, stars are also real people…Because stars have an existence in the world independent of their screen/"fiction" appearances, it is possible to believe… that as people they are more real than characters*

20   Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 8.

21   Kim, *K-Pop Live*, 9.

22   Ibid., 15.

23   P. David Marshall, "The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity: The Construction of Distinctive Authenticity," in *Celebrity and Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 161.

24   Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 1998 ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 97-98.

25   Ibid., 109.

in stories. This means that they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as "characters" are.[26]

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

On the television side, Su Holmes's essay "It's A Jungle Out There!" looks at the stage name/real name dialectic through the case of Jordan/Katie, a "26-year-old glamour model has found fame in Britain largely due to the size of her surgically-enhanced breasts."[27] Jordan's appearance on a reality TV show generated an "*extraordinarily* self-conscious debate about the relationship between 'Jordan,' the media image, and the person known in reality as 'Katie Price,' who was perceived by the show as being her 'real' self."[28] It is worth noting here that this dual identity was primarily focused through the lens of Jordan/Katie's romantic relationship with another celebrity on the show.[29] As I will suggest later, the use of real names in RPF fan fiction cannot be disentangled from the depiction of interpersonal relationships between the "characters" in the story. Moreover, the other participants on the show frequently switched between the names Jordan and Katie, a fact that will be significant when I discuss EXO's own reality TV show later in this paper. Holmes ends her discussion of this case with the note that Jordan/Katie are not as equal in that binary as the "slash" suggests. The Jordan/Katie persona/personalities are not only inextricably bound up with class and gender, but the reality show itself buys into "the notion that there is a 'core' to be found, even if this is partly 'in process' in the [show]. What is important… is the general suggestion that the public (celebrity) self and the private ('real') self may well be blurred, but they can ultimately be separated."[30] Like in Dyer's account, the "private/real" carries a value that the "public/celebrity" does not. In reality television, it may appear as though the value of the "real" (the "core") is being extracted from the public/celebrity "ore" that surrounds it. In fact, this value is generated through the simultaneous processes of blurring and separation. Separating the "real" from the "less real" identifies a "core" to be extracted, but the "ore" in this extended metaphor (i.e. the "public/celebrity") is not discarded but rather given enhanced value through the process of extraction.

A similar process of value generation occurs in the case of music celebrities. In "The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity," P. David Marshall argues that

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26   Ibid., 20.
27   Su Holmes, "It's a Jungle Out There! Playing the Game of Fame in Celebrity Reality TV," in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Studies*, ed. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (London: Routledge, 2006), 56.
28   Ibid.
29   Holmes, "Jungle," 57.
30   Ibid., 58.

"the transformations that have taken place in popular music in the twentieth century can be attributed to a number of factors… all of [which] have been modalized around concepts of *authenticity*."[31] Lip syncing, in particular, has come to embody this problem of authenticity in musical performance. In his book *Liveness,* Philip Auslander compares the lip syncing scandals of Milli Vanilli and Ashlee Simpson to discuss how fans of pop music, who do not necessarily conform to the same ideologies as fans of rock music, respond differently to questions of authenticity.[32] Crucially, Auslander mentions that Simpson rehabilitated her image by appearing on *Saturday Night Live* and publicly acknowledging her mistake, as well as introducing (in live performance) a song she wrote about the scandal.[33] Auslander writes that this "positioned Simpson squarely within rock ideology by stressing her authorship of the song and its autobiographical nature." Auslander and Marshall's insights suggest that music celebrities are just like reality TV stars in the sense that authenticity ("realness") is about proving an existence behind the image, which in turn adds value to the image. The acknowledgement of and performative gesture toward *interiority*, the perception of "something else" that lies beneath the public persona, and the idea of *depth* is crucial here, partially concealed but always informing the persona above as *intimacy*. The creative act of writing a song about one's personal experience connects the "interior" with the "public." The public scandal is given new depth and weight: the audience, who has previously known only the "public," feels like they have gotten a privileged glimpse into the "private." In similar terms, Marshall writes that the love songs performed by teen idols serve as a conduit between the audience (the fan) and the "personal and private realm of the singer" and more generally that "popular music works… [to break] down the distance between the pop star and the individual audience member at the very least in the level of fantasy for the audience member."[34] The idol's relationship to celebrity is characterized as a "play between accessibility to the group members' intimate world and the impossibility of fully entering that world."[35] In his paper about the Korean pop star Rain, Hyunjoon Shin suggests that the English stage name "Rain", a literal translation of the Korean stage name "*Bi*", served to position the star within a global market.[36] However, this does not explain the Korean stage name *Bi*, but rather suggests that the stage name is less about marketing and more about characterizing the "play" between accessibility and impossibility.

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31   Marshall, "Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity," 150 (emphasis mine).
32   Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 2008), 126.
33   Ibid.
34   Marshall, "Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity," 177.
35   Ibid., 179.
36   Hyunjoon Shin, "Have You Ever Seen the *Rain*? And Who'll Stop the *Rain*?: The Globalizing Project of Korean Pop (K-Pop)," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (2009): 514-515.

The claim that idols are always making calculated decisions about whether to refer to their fellow members by their stage names or their real names is not made here. Nonetheless, the *effect* is one of intimacy, a private world that is separate from the world of onstage performances and televised appearances, at which fans can get a glimpse of through these posts and broadcasts. The real name serves as a kind of shorthand for this private world, proof of "the basic and essential authenticity that a 'real' person is housed in the sign construction."[37] In Marshall's words, the real name represents "accessibility to the group members' intimate world" while the stage name represents "the impossibility of fully entering that world."[38] Intimacy, as the *transgression of distance*, can only be created by *first creating distance*, which the stage name does. Marshall uses the term "transgression" in a similar way in his essay 'The Cinematic Apparatus,' arguing that the "maintenance of celebrity status for the film actor" involves an "intense search for their meaning and coherence beyond the screen into their private lives."[39] While there are many factors behind the use of stage names in Korean entertainment, not least of which is a cultural preoccupation with names as a source of good fortune[40], many Korean celebrities speak of the fact that their real name did not "sound celebrity-like" enough to use.[41] In other words, an important function of the stage name is to create this sense of distance from everyday life, to nominally move the star from the sphere of private ordinariness into the sphere of public extraordinariness. Marshall goes even further and argues that it is this "combination of familiarity and extraordinariness [that] gives the celebrity its ideological power."[42] Bound up in that is the idea that the ordinary sphere is the "real" and the extraordinary sphere is somehow "false,"[43] meaning that a K-pop star who uses a stage name must periodically gesture back to their real name to prove their realness and to demonstrate their authenticity by performatively transgressing upon the distance they have created.

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37   P. David Marshall, "Preface," in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xix.

38   Marshall, "Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity," 179.

39   P. David Marshall, "The Cinematic Apparatus and the Construction of the Film Celebrity," in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 105.

40   "Name Change in Korea," *Ask a Korean! (Blogspot)*, October 18, 2013, http://askakorean.blogspot.com/2013/10/name-change-in-korea.html.

41   Platinum1004, "Why Do Many Korean Actors/Singers Change Their Names: Comments," Reddit post, June 10, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/koreanvariety/comments/27qppl/why_do_many_korean_actorssingers_change_their.

42   Marshall, "Cinematic Apparatus," 86.

43   Dyer, *Stars*, 43.

The K-Pop Celebrity Text in Reality Television

In 2013, EXO starred in their own reality TV series called *EXO's Showtime*.[44] *Showtime* purports to depict the "off-stage" life of the EXO members, but actually shows the members participating in highly staged events such as throwing birthday parties (Episode 3), exchanging Secret Santa gifts (Episode 4), and engaging in musical or physical games with each other (Episode 9). In her essay on English-language celebrity reality TV, Su Holmes notes that "reality TV's claim to present the real, to strip away the celebrity persona, comes into conflict with its status as an openly performative space which is deeply self-conscious about its mediated status."[45] The footage in *Showtime*, as in most Korean reality shows, does not attempt to pass itself off as raw or unedited; on the contrary, the show features vivid subtitles and visual effects to accentuate the viewing experience. *Showtime*'s claim to authenticity therefore lies not in how it is presented (i.e. its format), but in how the people onscreen comport themselves. The members are shown wearing casual clothing, cracking inside jokes, and perhaps most crucially, referring to each other by their *real names.*

In one segment, other idols at SM Entertainment are asked whether they can identify the EXO members by name. During this segment, TVXQ member Changmin proudly proclaims that he not only knows Xiumin's stage name, but also his real name, Kim Minseok. This display of knowledge is meant to signify that he is close enough to Xiumin, or at least interested enough in him, to know both his names. A few seconds later, both members of TVXQ are unable to identify Lay's stage name, although they both know that his real name is Zhang Yixing. Yunho pretends to leave the room (i.e. escapes the camera frame) in embarrassment at not knowing the answer, but Changmin soon reveals that this was a charade; he does know Lay's stage name. This interaction is a particularly complicated interplay between stage name and real name. Depending on the context, knowing the stage name *or* knowing the real name can be a sign of intimacy (i.e. senior-junior intimacy within a company). Not knowing either or both can be a sign of shame, of a breakdown in relations between neighbors. More generally, this interaction exposes the conflict that Holmes points to in reality TV, between its claim to "strip away the celebrity persona" and its "status as an openly performative space which is deeply self-conscious about its mediated status."[46] Changmin pretending not to know Lay's stage name is a staged joke, partially if not completely for the benefit of the camera, yet it paradoxically signifies authenticity and intimacy by bridging the perceived, if not actually real gap between TVXQ, a legendary idol group that has been promoted for more than ten years at the time of the broadcast, and EXO, a relatively new idol group that have been together less than two years. *Showtime* itself gestures to this

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44   *EXO's Showtime*, performed by EXO (November 28, 2013—February 13, 2014; Seoul: SM C&C/MBC Every1), TV.

45   Holmes, "Jungle," 52.

46   Ibid.

conflict: when Suho approaches the members of Super Junior to ask them the same question, he finds two of them rehearsing in their dressing room. The subtitles make note of this fact, but add a little addendum: "Is this a set-up? Or is it real?"

By the ninth episode, the show begins to make distinctions between the stage name and the real name depending on the context. During a rehearsal, Luhan reminisces about a song that Suho used to sing during their trainee days. When Suho begins singing the song in the present-day, the subtitles note, "Suho is singing trainee Junmyeon's favorite song." The subtitles give the impression that Suho and Junmyeon (Suho's real name) are different people, separated not only by their name but their idol/trainee statuses. The stage name/real name dichotomy works here to show that the celebrity has a past, has depth, and more importantly that fans can have access to that depth by knowing more about their past. Similarly, in episode four, the members speak about an incident in which they witnessed D.O. crying while watching anime, and the subtitles denote this moment as "The young boy Kyungsoo was moved by the animation." Although the members do not specify when this incident took place, the use of "young boy" as well as D.O.'s real name gestures back to a nostalgic past.

Another example of this can be seen in a girl group member's appearance on a reality show called *Baek Jong Won's Alley Restaurant*.[47] Solar, a member of the girl group MAMAMOO, was brought on the show to sample a dish served by a restaurant on the show. Her appearance was almost immediately questioned by the show's hosts, who joked that the name "Solar," an English name, sounded like a person who would enjoy pasta (typically perceived to be a "Western" food) more than the dish that she had been brought in to sample, *cheonggukjang,* a fermented soybean stew perceived as a typical Korean food. One of the hosts, prompted by a cue card that had been prepared for him by the production staff, then delivered the punchline of the "joke": Solar's real name is Kim Yong Sun, a name that all three hosts instantly associate with the countryside, Korean-ness, and other ineffable factors related to *cheonggukjang*. In highlighting the difference between her stage name and her real name, the hosts' first question verifies Solar's claim to enjoy this dish. Although Solar does not speak during this segment as she is not in the same room as the hosts, the revealing of her real name is a performative transgression that reinforces her authenticity as a Korean woman who enjoys *cheonggukjang.*

The K-Pop Celebrity Text in Fan Fiction Meta

The exploitation of the interplay between "accessibility" and "impossibility"[48] is not confined only to the Korean celebrity, the K-pop idol, and the K-pop industry. Fan producers also mine this "gap" in interesting ways. LiveJournal user grisclair, in a post defending the practice of RPF, writes:

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47   *Baek Jong Won's Alley Restaurant*, "Episode 208," directed by Jeong Ujin, I Gwanwon, and Yun Jongho, aired November 13, 2019, on SBS.
48   Marshall, "Meanings of Popular Music Celebrity," 179.

The thing about RPF is: there is no way for you to know whether the "source text" is genuine. For FPF fandoms such as books or TV shows, the source text is pretty black and white…The source text is predetermined as the "canon" by the original author. In the case of RPF, the "source text" gets a little muddy. What we call "canon" in RPF fandom is essentially TV appearances, interviews, some stalkerish/blurry candid snapshots, anecdotal "fanaccounts," and such subjective sources. What percentage of these things are scripted, played up, jokes, lies, or plain misinterpretation by fans? What is the guarantee that what these celebrities show on camera is how they are like off-camera/in private life? Fans are just observers trying to interpret this (very choppy, very unreliable) source text.[49]

This is very similar to Dyer's contention that the film star is a construction "known and expressed only through films, stories, publicity, etc."[50] Grisclair's account suggests that fans are well-aware that both the distance and the intimacy designed to bridge the distance are constructions, and that the "real" personality is as much on-camera as the "stage" persona. Far from being alienating, however, RPF writers like grisclair see that impossibility as productive:

My source text is unreliable and sketchy as fuck. Real Person and Fictional Persona are similar in superficial characteristics, but the Fictional Persona is absolutely a Fictional Character in my head. I share this Fictional Character with other people in the same fandom, and we make up a Collaborative Fantasy Space where our headcanons interact and build our interpretations of these Real People with personas we happen to love.[51]

The impossibility of a reliable source text, of truly knowing the celebrity on an intimate level, frees the fan producer from a certain level of commitment to the real. Grisclair quotes another writer in saying:

While I'm writing about them…I write them in a certain way, a little more thoughtful than they probably are, a little more genuine, a little more confused. I write them trying harder to get through life than I think they really are… I romanticize their problems, their struggles, to give them greater weight and depth than just some fucking rich kid who's all woe is me, my life is so hard. I do that because I don't want to read about their bloated, competitive, soulless, consumptive, defensive little lives.[52]

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49   Grisclair, "RPS, Slash, and K-Pop."
50   Dyer, "Stars," 20.
51   Grisclair, "RPS, Slash, and K-Pop."
52   Ibid.

On the other hand, this describes RPF writers' dependence on what I have discussed previously as the perception of *depth*, the "'real' lurking *beneath*,"[53] which the stage name/real name dichotomy gestures toward. Celebrities become more interesting, by these writers' own admission, when they are perceived to have greater underlying problems than "just some fucking rich kid who's all woe is me, my life is so hard."[54] This is what critics of RPF mean when they call RPF exploitative, when fanfiction writers make use of real personal tragedies to lend their characterizations "greater weight and depth."[55]

It is possible to make a comparison here between these writers and Joshua Gamson's "game players."[56] In his research into the relationship between audience and celebrity, Gamson identified game players as a category of audience who "read the celebrity text as semi-fictional" rather than realistic and are "unconcerned with questions of truth and authenticity. Rather, the celebrity system becomes a source of play."[57] Grisclair's earlier comments also bear a resemblance to Holmes' comments about the "ever-present oscillation" in reality TV programming, in which "viewers have not so much abandoned the '*idea* of authenticity' as they aim to search out the moment when people seem to be 'really' themselves in an unreal environment."[58] Holmes goes on to say that "this structure is in many ways resonant of our relations with the textual construction of celebrity: we understand the mediated nature of the celebrity image, but we are perpetually encouraged to search the persona for elements of the real and authentic, beckoned by the promise of intimate access to their 'real' selves."[59] This suggests that RPF writers, instead of being characterized as deviant – Sean Redmond writes that "obsessive fans blur and confuse the real and the fictional so that the star or celebrity is imagined to respond to, or get in the way of, their wishes and desires"[60] – should be considered as "an audience highly conversant in the concept of celebrity image production and construction"[61] who are taking up the industry's invitation "not simply to seek out the 'real' self behind the image but also to (apparently) view the processes of fabrication and performance which constitute this entity.[62] The "interplay" between accessibility and impossibility that RPF writers take up in their work is the same play that is "actively precipitate[d]

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53   Holmes, "Jungle," 58.
54   Grisclair, "RPS, Slash, and K-Pop."
55   Ibid.
56   Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 178.
57   Ibid.
58   Holmes, "Jungle," 53.
59   Ibid.
60   Sean Redmond, "Intimate Fame Everywhere," in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Studies*, ed. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (London: Routledge, 2006), 34.
61   Ibid., 62.
62   Holmes, "Jungle," 62.

by reality television programs as "integral to… viewing pleasure."[63] It is a chicken-and-egg scenario where fans' desire to "search the persona for elements of the real and authentic" is co-opted by the industry's desire to capitalize on the "promise of intimate access."[64]

The Relationship Between the Fan Fiction Text and the Reality TV Text

At first glance, "In the Territory of the Dragon King" appears to have no connection to the EXO members' real lives. None of the EXO members have any significant connection to Jeju Island, the primary setting for the fan fiction work and the characters are surrounded by characters that are also drawn from public personalities such as other EXO members and other idols at SM Entertainment rather than the idols' non-public friends and family. Part of Baekhyun's arc in the fan fiction work involves the loss of his friend, Yixing, Lay, who left Korea to move back to China, but the work was written long before Lay's effective hiatus from EXO promotions in South Korea.[65] Unlike Tao, Luhan, and Kris, Lay remains nominally part of the group. But the characterizations are notably similar to how the EXO members present themselves in their reality shows. Baekhyun is effervescent and talkative, masking a deep insecurity about his future, and Kyungsoo is shy and reserved until he opens up to Baekhyun over the course of the story. While Baekhyun and Kyungsoo's relationship in the fan fiction text is certainly beyond what any reality show would suggest, the close friendship between Baekhyun, Chanyeol, and Jongdae in the fan fiction work mirrors the relationship that the three idols show in their reality series. For example, all three characters are the same age and affectionately referred to by fans as the "beagle line."[66] There is also an unexpected pleasure when curledupkitten includes details like Baekhyun being unable to eat cucumbers in Chapter Four, a strong dislike of which the idol has expressed in shows like *Roommate*.[67] Such references testify to curledupkitten's dedication as a fan and reward other fans' close reading, not only of the fan fiction text but of the celebrity text as well.

I take these examples within the context of the meta essays referenced above, and argue that RPF writers are performing the same transgression of authenticity that K-pop stars perform, using the real name to gesture an interiority that can be explored in the narrative world of the fan fiction work. However, RPF writers like grisclair see that interiority as theirs to invent, breaking the relationship between the real name and the star's "real" interiority.

63   Holmes, "Jungle," 62.
64   Ibid., 53.
65   EmmyKookieMin, "What Is the Deal with EXO's Lay?" Allkpop forum post, January 3, 2018, https://www.allkpop.com/forum/threads/what-is-the-deal-with-exos-lay.132437/.
66   Minjiya, "5 Reasons Why EXO's Beagle Line Is Called the Beagle Line," *Soompi*, January 26, 2016, https://www.soompi.com/article/813027wpp/5-reasons-why-exos-beagle-line-is-called-the-beagle-line.
67   July 27, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_EpbP93bcA.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that K-pop fan fiction writers and the K-pop industry both negotiate transgressions of authenticity. RPF writers are borrowing the stage name/real name construction and its performative transgression from the K-pop industry, but the industry sets up that dialectic because of the existing fan desire for intimacy/authenticity. In order to prove themselves as being authentic and consists of depth, K-pop idols move back and forth between the stage name and the real name as the situation requires. The notion that they might do it unconsciously is no less indicative of the industry's willingness to exploit the gap that the stage name/ real name dichotomy presents. At the surface level, the K-pop industry continues to espouse a "static" model of celebrity in which stars are essentially ordinary people who occasionally don a "mask", the "persona", for work purposes. In actuality, the K-pop idol embodies a dynamic model of celebrity in which value is generated through the constant negotiation between the ostentatiously public and the ostensibly private. RPF exists because the entertainment industry's transgression of authenticity depends on fans being savvy media consumers, to "understand the mediated nature of the celebrity image" while being "perpetually encouraged to search the persona for elements of the real and authentic."[68] But RPF writers turn this back on the industry by performing their own transgressions of authenticity. They destabilize the "basic and essential authenticity that a 'real' person is housed in the sign construction" by substituting their own definition of what makes a person "real." Intimacy is not the reward of the transgression of distance, but rather an affect that is generated through the act of transgression. In RPF, the real name is the vehicle by which writers "reach back" toward an interiority that is theirs to invent. By using real names in their work, RPF writers both give the lie to their statement that they are only interested in the fictional persona of celebrities and expose the real name for what it is: not a true signifier of the celebrity's interiority, but yet another media construction.

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68   Holmes, "Jungle," 53.