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Girls' Generation? Gender, (Dis)Empowerment, and K-pop

The hottest phrase in Korea nowadays is undeniably "girl group." But girl group fever is more than just a trend: it's symbolic of a cultural era that is embracing the expulsion of authoritarian ideology.

So begins the table of contents blurb for a story on the rise of girl groups (*kŏl kŭrup*) in the March 2010 issue of *Korea*, a public-relations magazine published under the auspices of the Korean Culture and Information Service. Beginning in 2007, with the success of the Wonder Girls, ensembles composed of from three to nine females in their teens or early twenties have dominated South Korean popular music.[1] Certainly the explosion of the term *kŏl kŭrup* in recent public discourse is undeniable: a search of the KBS news archive, for example, turns up the first use only in 2008 with but three citations for the entire year.[2] By 2009, however, this number had increased to 39, and in 2010 KBS-News ran 174 items employing the term *kŏl kŭrup*. Interest continues to expand: in 2011, 356 stories on KBS featured the term.

Equally notably, governmental forces are taking advantage of this trend. In May 2010, one girl group's song—"Huh" by 4Minute—was championed as "extolling freedom of choice" and used as part of a radio propaganda broadcast to North Korea[3]; the following month, the Defense Ministry discussed broadcasting girl group music videos on screens along the DMZ as part of psychological warfare operations.[4] In contrasting but related fashion, the recent success of Korea's girl groups in Japan has become central to promoting a second surge of the Korean Wave and has been heralded by the media in sometimes strident fashion: "Korean Idols 'Occupy Japanese Archipelago,' Lay Waste to Japan" (*Han aidol 'ilyŏldo chŏmryŏng,' ilbon chot'ohwashikida*) reads the title of one particularly egregious article.[5] Strik-

ingly, a number of reports on the high-profile dispute of girl group KARA with its management focused not on the suit itself or the controversial labor structure of the entertainment system but rather on the effect the dispute might have on Korean assertions of brand nationalism.[6]

These examples illustrate the extent to which girl groups have become both a newsworthy topic for media authorities and a tool to be wielded by official interests. As "Korea, Inc." deploys its cultural industries in a bid for global market share, the genre's success has led to a hyperbolic discourse seeking to transcend the narrower realm of pop music. The *Korea* article continues:

> No matter our age or gender, these girls allow us to dream once again, moving us with their cheerfulness and a feeling of fresh radiance. The vibrancy of their songs, dances, clothes, and performances is so irresistible that every move is picked up by the world's radar. They render the term "singer" insufficient. They are at the edge of the frontier of popular culture, but they are not just pioneers—they are the culture.[7]

Nonetheless, despite top-down promotion and accompanying breathless celebrations, the liberating nature of the phenomenon remains debatable. Of course, whenever the market drives musical creation and groups are manufactured rather than arising organically, "authenticity" becomes suspect, and the organization of Korea's music industry allows idol groups minimal artistic autonomy. Furthermore, within a context of changing social mores and reduced profits from Korea's notoriously high levels of illegal downloading, the need for entertainment companies to attract attention for their own performers amid the current glut of groups has led to an increased sexualization of music videos, performances, and commercial endorsements.[8]

Particularly questionable is the correlation of a preponderance of successful young female ensembles in Korean pop music with an expulsion of authoritarian ideology. In this chapter, we engage in a reading of the lyrical and visual codes of the music videos of Korean girl groups from 2007 to early 2011 in order to challenge the notion that the phenomenon signals escape from patriarchy or embedded power structures. As we will argue, although elements of current packaging may be novel, the gender ideologies propagated by such groups as Girls' Generation, KARA, T-ara, Wonder Girls, Miss-A, 2NE1, 4Minute, and similar ensembles have offered society, and young women in particular, at best a highly ambivalent empowerment.

While a substantial body of work exists on gender and Western popular music generally and music videos specifically,[9] and scholars have addressed Korean gender ideologies in film and drama,[10] thus far surprisingly little work has been done on gender and contemporary Korean popular music, despite the salience of gender as a key issue driving its production and consumption and pop music's prominence as a site for the transmission of, and contestation over, gender roles.[11] The considerable evolution in representations of gender and sexuality in Korea since the turn of the millennium renders this lacuna all the more noteworthy. One might cite, for example, the rise of Korean soft masculinity via the *kkonminam* (lit. "flower-handsome man"); sympathetic portrayals of homosexuality (for example, the 2005 hit film *The King and the Clown* and the 2010 drama *Beautiful Life*); and increasing public awareness of transgenderism, as witnessed in the popularity of entertainer Harisu.[12] Popular representations of the feminine have also diversified: in film, the confrontational but nonetheless desirable protagonists of *My Sassy Girl* (2001) and *My Wife Is a Gangster* (2001) exemplify a blurring of gender roles; *The Art of Seduction* (2005) and *Bewitching Attraction* (2006) treat the commodification of provocative femininity within consumer society; and 2008's *My Wife Got Married* and *Live Together* each take female sexual desire and subjectivity as central themes.[13] In comparison, representations of gender roles from girl groups have shown rather less variation.

We treat girl group music videos as a crucial component in the contemporary dissemination of ideologies of gender and sexuality for a few significant reasons. First, although more traditional consumption of Korean pop music exists, albeit with cassettes and CDs having yielded to digital media playback, Korean popular music is driven by the visual, not only via live performance on television but in music videos (regularly referred to as M/V in Korea) too. As Hoon-Soon Kim notes, "The music video has captivated the younger generation . . . and has changed the notion of music from that of something primarily auditory to something to watch as well."[14] Music videos are now consumed in large numbers on the Internet. As of March 2012, the two most watched videos of all time on the Korean YouTube channel were both from girl groups: the official video for the song "Gee" by Girls' Generation, which had been viewed 67 million times, and "Nobody" by competitors Wonder Girls, seen over 56 million times. The savvy use of YouTube, literally and figuratively a key "site" for the experience and distribution of music at a mass level, has now become a core component of Korean entertainment companies' promotion strategies, especially at the international

level.[15] Memorable images from music videos and signature dances for songs become touchstones in Korean popular culture and circulate widely.

A second consideration is that, with few exceptions, performers do not compose their own music but become part of the stable of conglomerates, at the moment headed by the triumvirate of SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment, who together manage most of the groups discussed below. Indeed, one may well regard Korean popular music artists as general entertainers (and thus see unintended irony in the earlier Deok-hyeon Jeong characterization of the term *singer* as "insufficient"), for with the collapse of recorded music sales success has come to depend not so much on vocal talent as dancing ability, physical attractiveness, and the projection of image through appearance in live performances, television programs, advertisements, and so on. In this environment, music videos become not an autonomous expression of performer sensibility but a marketing tactic concocted by managers to sell a cultural product. In order to be effective, a music video (M/V) must resonate with the zeitgeist in the way it conforms to, or in some cases challenges, normative expectations; in this sense it becomes part of a discourse "that is socially constructed by the interplay among mainstream mores and values, consumption practices, and subjective interpretation of its meanings by its audiences."[16]

Concentrating on a reading of lyrics and music videos therefore requires caveats. While the reception of any text is open to contestation, the rapid crosscutting between shots and decontextualizations of music videos do far less to foreclose particular interpretations than the generally more coherent narratives of film or fiction, and the medium's succession of fragmented, spectacular images set to musical accompaniment allows individuals enormous range in the construction of meaning. In a study of audience reaction to Madonna's music videos, J. Brown and L. Schulze also demonstrate wide differences by race, gender, and fandom levels in how viewers perceived a given piece[17]; likewise, within Korea itself age and gender, among other considerations, will have an impact on audience interpretation of videos. Furthermore, pop music now plays a crucial role in Korea's increasing dialogue with the outside world. K-pop's enthusiastic global fan base means that domestic interpretations cannot be accorded exclusive validity any more than one can privilege American understandings of an Eminem or Lady Gaga video as more "correct" than others.

Consequently we stress that our own readings of Korean girl group music videos, while hopefully illuminating, are meant to stimulate discussion rather than be authoritative; our aim is to infiltrate the triumphant discourse of the cultural industries and their champions with a critical ap-

praisal in light of a germane question: are the postmodern expressions of Korean music videos "just another representational strategy that sustains gender discrimination by reinforcing the cultural logic of consumer capitalism," or do "they form a resistant style of expression that can break away from the binarism of the existing patriarchal system"?[18]

Recurrent tropes in the studied presentation of girl groups undercut claims to a progressive ethos. Instead of nuanced views of gendered social identities, Korean girl group music videos and lyrics, albeit with key exceptions, reinforce a dichotomization of male and female. As Ch'a U-jin argues, in one of the few academic analyses of the girl group phenomenon to have appeared thus far, management companies have targeted varying audiences through product differentiation, with Girls' Generation and KARA at one pole, epitomizing the stoking of male fantasy, and at the other 4Minute and 2NE1, who strive for identification from young females.[19] Nonetheless, regardless of where videos fall in relation to this continuum, not only do the roughly 100 girl group videos from 2007–11 surveyed for this chapter almost without exception focus on the female image as visual spectacle; they can also be subsumed within a limited set of categories.[20] Most notably, while girl group singers often express desire openly, the viewer in such videos is regularly constructed as male, and the potential assertion of subjectivity is accompanied by a coy passivity that returns initiative to men. Another set of songs suggests women's exertion of control, but influence is wielded through recourse to the force of a feminine sexuality that renders males helpless and thus transmits a message that narcissistic desirability is the route to redress power imbalance. Even two additional categories of songs, ostensibly directed toward young females through referencing solidarity in acting according to one's own wishes or wreaking revenge on unfaithful boyfriends, nevertheless remain committed to a self-objectifying preoccupation with an external gaze or continue to define women in relation to men. While this typology is not exhaustive and we consider the exceptional case of the group f(x), the prevalence of songs from these categories challenges more benign interpretations of the current dominance of girl groups in Korean pop culture.

OH, OPPA!

Let us consider, then, examples of the first set of girl group videos, those in which desire, often unrequited, for a male is expressed. While it is difficult to assess the impact of a given song, sales, chart listings, and Internet video hit counts offer a reasonable gauge of significance, and accordingly we begin with an analysis of one of the most iconic and ubiquitous Korean hits of the

last few years, "Oh!" released in January 2010 by Girls' Generation, currently the reigning princesses of K-pop.

A stylistic tic of Korean girl group videos is a brief introductory sequence that sets up the song proper and provides a frame of reference in which to read it. "Oh!" begins with the nine members of the group relaxing playfully in an apparent communal living situation. After eight seconds of music that resembles a calliope and reinforces a carnivallike atmosphere, the viewer sees a computer displaying an image of the nine members of the band wearing football cheerleader outfits and each holding a placard to spell out in English "GIRLS' ♥ YOU." The group members thus announce collective affection for a second person addressee, ambiguously treated as singular or plural, in a strongly gendered image that renders this "you," and the viewer, male. The video then launches into the song itself, the visuals cutting between the band at home and in ensemble dance performances at a football stadium:

Oppa, look at me, take a good look at me
(This is the first time I've talked like this, ha!)
I fixed my hair and put on makeup
(How come you're the only one who's so oblivious?)

Several points deserve comment: first of all, the term of address applied here for the male, as in most girl group songs, is *oppa*. Literally this means "elder brother of a female" and can be used by young women to address a slightly older male, often with a connotation of amatory interest. In Korea's age-based hierarchy, the term by definition subordinates the female, and its use thus becomes part of the repertoire of *aegyo*, a calculated performance of cuteness that infantilizes those (most frequently female) who engage in it in the hope of gaining the favor of a superior or attracting romantic attention.

One should also consider the decision to present Girls' Generation as cheerleaders for American football, which is far from a major sport in Korea. Invocation of a fantasy America is not uncommon in Korean music videos, presumably not only to facilitate international appeal, eye-catching images, and the free flow of imagination that characterizes the genre but also to obviate a need to conform closely to Korean reality. Here, the pairing of football players with cheerleaders emphasizes gender differentiation as well: the men's pads and helmets, which obscure their faces throughout, accentuate power and virility; in comparison, the women appear fragile and delicate, an impression enhanced by close-ups of affected *aegyo* poses. Elements of hero worship are also evident, as members of Girls' Generation are seen holding, embracing, or kissing the helmet, which comes to embody a rugged, desirable, hard masculinity (see, for example, 0:35–0:39 in the M/V).

The lyrics apologize for the girls' forwardness and desire for attention as they announce that never before have they spoken so daringly:

Thump thump, my heart is beating . . .
Oh! Oh! Oh! I love you *oppa*
Ah! Ah! Ah! So, so much
Please don't laugh! I'm shy
I really mean it, please don't tease me
But there go my silly words again . . .

The overwhelming attractiveness of *oppa* has impelled a sexual maturation. He is presented as the first object of affection, yet nonetheless remains impassive. Homosocial harmony offsets intimations of rivalry, and the video's images and lyrics present an incongruity between claims of shy innocence and flirtatious overtures, revealing dress and eroticized dance moves. In other words, there coexist fantasy-fueling projections of both virginal demeanor and eager collective anticipation of defloration. This tension is pervasive in this category of girl group videos, serving as a quasi-master trope.

In Girls' Generation's 2009 megahit "Gee," enough similar elements are present as to suggest conscious formula. The video opens with the members of the group configured as mannequins in a clothing store, and the treatment of the group as figurines, void of personality, further effaces an individuality already weakened by ensemble performance and apparel designed to create a visual effect of overall likeness.[21] Here the mannequins are seemingly inspired to life by their communal desire for the attractive male employee, and the song becomes an ode to romantic awakening, beginning in English: "Uh-huh. Listen, boy, my first love story." As in "Oh!" the lyrics point to shyness in falling in love (*sarange ppajyŏsŏ sujubŭn gŏl*), a heart thumping with excitement, and self-deprecating references to being made a fool (*pabo*) by desire (see plate 5). Close-ups of the women's hands brought to upper body and face in childlike fashion, intended to be endearing, again feature throughout (note especially the successive cuts at 0:38–0:40 and 0:59–1:04), and professions of shyness are interspersed with dance shots of the members in their signature hot pants.

This motif of dolls brought to life as fantasy figures becomes even more sexually charged in the video to Girls' Generation 2009 follow-up single "*Sowŏnŭl malhaebwa*" (Tell me your wish), which employs, unusually, two brief introductory sequences before the song proper. In the first (0:00–0:16), the members of the group materialize around an oversized genie lamp to the accompaniment of sitar and tabla (see fig. 14.1), setting the mood for lyrics that relate the girls' submissive willingness to serve as fan-

Figure 14.1. Opening sequence of "Tell Me Your Wish" by Girls' Generation.

tasy objects and effectively convert them into ciphers whose existence depends on flattering male desires:

> Tell me your wish
> Tell me the little dreams in your heart
> Try to draw the ideal woman in your head
> Then look at me
> I'm your genie, your dream, your genie.

The second introductory sequence (0:17–0:28) employs a disco-inflected soundtrack that begins with a sleek (or unctuous, depending on one's perspective) masculine voice saying, "Hey," and goes further in establishing the video as an erotic daydream. The gendering of the camera's gaze becomes explicit: in three successive point of view shots, a male, hands visible in front, comes upon a trio of welcoming band members. In the first shot the subject opens a door and discovers girls fighting with pillows on a pink bed that remains suggestively visible at various points throughout the M/V; it is almost as if the camera has intruded upon a harem, or more to the point, a pornographic video set, and thus renders the viewer a voyeuristic accomplice as the girls' initial surprise yields to delight. In the second shot, the male is welcomed into a club scene and is drawn toward soft drinks stacked on a table. Eager anticipation of a male presence becomes particularly striking in the third shot as—reminiscent of a stag party—a group member jumps out of a cake in welcome. A recapitulated three-shot sequence (2:27–2:37) adds hints of erotic progression from coy refusal to acquiescence and satisfaction: in the first, by the bed, one member wags a finger at the subject as if

to say "naughty boy" but is preempted by another who gives a come-hither gesture; in the second, the subject snaps a photo of the girls' posing, and the third involves the provocative smearing of white frosting from a cake that says "I ♥ U." The video, unsurprisingly, is otherwise composed of seductive dance sequences with eroticized shots and ample attention to the group's bare legs.

Girls' Generation is, of course, hardly the only girl group whose videos hold out the fantasy that the viewer is a male addressee desired by eagerly awaiting females who will not act until he makes the first move. The visuals of "Mister" by KARA, for instance, feature the *ŏngdŏngi ch'um*, a dance that became notorious for its titillating swaying of the buttocks, and the lyrics detail growing interest in the song's addressee and include hopeful invitations: "I like you and my heart is getting bolder (come closer, closer). My heart keeps thumping . . . Hey, mister. Look over here, mister." Nevertheless, ultimate initiative remains with the male, who again is placed in a superior position with the English title address and flattered into imagining his uniqueness ("I've never felt like this before").

The trope of simultaneous innocence and anticipation persists even when lyrics and images come into conflict with each other: the protagonist of T-ara's video for "Like the First Time," for instance, is presented as a naïf whose girlfriends tell her she needs to meet a man, and they then provide advice on slimming, style, and comportment. The song's lyrics, however, specifically invoke experience ("This isn't my first love/I'm not innocent"), and the rap break, both lyrically and visually, transforms the protagonist from ingénue to wizened aggressor, as she claims that she will refuse a man who constrains her, and the choreography progresses to overtly sexual gestures. Nonetheless, the video returns to the image of the protagonist shyly awaiting her crush's approval: they meet at a café for a first date and when he invites her onward to continue their rendezvous, she is congratulated by her girlfriends, who are watching expectantly in the background, and then dashes after him giddily. The video thus presents a striking example of Korean popular culture's current attempts to accommodate contradictory imperatives, not always with great logic, and with consequences for a reading of the empowering nature of the recent surge in girl groups.

I'M SO HOT . . .

In her study of Korean music videos shortly after the turn of the millennium, Kim notes that "women are presented in polarized images . . . as either an innocent and sweet girl or a provocative and sexy femme fatale" but also that many images fall between the two extremes, such as a "sexy yet inno-

Figure 14.2. So Hee gives a knowing look in the Wonder Girls' "So Hot," acknowledging the power she wields over the male gaze.

cent girl" and focus on "her body dancing sexily."[22] By the latter part of the decade, this third option had become almost exclusive in girl group videos: lyrical and visual strategies steer away from "either/or" toward "both/and," urging, in varying proportions, a melding of the two poles as a goal to strive for: claim to virtue remains, but sexiness trumps it as de rigueur quality.[23]

Patriarchal continuity remains obvious in the songs analyzed above, which depict an essential harmony between the sexes, governed by projections of availability and an encouragement of pursuit that returns power to the male. In contrast, a further set of songs suggests that the sexes are engaged in an antagonistic, zero-sum struggle for control. Although such songs, in encouraging action for women beyond flattering male fantasy, less patently submit to traditional norms, they too undercut their own movement toward a more hopeful world.

Consider "Irony," the first single from the Wonder Girls, whose success launched the current surge of girl groups. The song's introductory sequence contains a shot of the Wonder Girls' logo, followed by a wolf whistle. Although the English term "wolf whistle" does not translate literally into Korean, it is a useful phrase here, for in the ideological universe of girl group videos, men are regularly *nŭktae* (wolves) and women, not infrequently, *yŏu* (foxes). These traditional animal metaphors continue to resonate in contem-

porary Korean popular discourse and envisage men as dangerous predators and women as sly creatures, the latter figured specifically in the *kumiho*, a nine-tailed fox of folklore that would transform into a beautiful woman and seduce men in order to eat their liver.

In songs that reflect such a worldview, women rely on physical attraction to gain an advantage; rather than simply performing to the dictates of the male gaze, such videos demonstrate its knowing exploitation. The Wonder Girls' 2008 hit "So Hot" flirts, almost literally, with narcissism as a desirable goal and deserves analysis for its simultaneous satire and nurturing of such an attitude. The video opens as the front of a giant gift-wrapped box drops away to reveal the group members strutting within. Each wears a piece of clothing with leopard print that conveys a knowing feline sexuality. The video then intersperses shots of them dancing provocatively within the box and being fawned over in turn by male admirers, to the accompaniment of an infectious hip-hop beat and over the top lyrics:

> Why do you keep looking at me?
> Am I that pretty?
> Well, even if I am, if you stare at me like that
> I get a little embarrassed

Humor is undeniably present here: one group member turns up her nose at the gifts her suitors present her with and then gazes longingly at a huge diamond in a store window, only to have the men scatter in fright. Group leader Sun Ye accepts a bouquet from a man who jumps for joy, at which she immediately flings the flowers over her shoulder. Nor is the group afraid to poke fun at itself: member So Hee stumbles while walking on a red carpet and pulls herself up as if nothing happened.

But what message does the video convey ultimately? The humor present might allow one to dismiss it all simply as a joke, but for the fact that at the song's release the Wonder Girls were arguably the top pop stars in the land and constructed in popular discourse as iconically "hot." Consequently, for them to claim to be so as they dance seductively only engages the irony that titled their first single in confused fashion. The *naesung* (that is, a coy disavowal of inner intention) of the group's members within the video in claiming to be embarrassed by stares is thus matched by the song's meta-strategy.

Engagement with, and manipulation of, the male gaze, moreover, could hardly be more self-conscious: So Hee plays to admiring cameras beneath a theater marquee, and paparazzi lurk in the bushes snapping shots of the group's rapper Yu Bin lounging at a pool. Yu Bin, however, coolly reverses

the dynamic. When a man is so smitten by her that he falls off balance and belly flops into the water, she rates his dive like an Olympic judge: zero. In other words, the video shows the Wonder Girls arousing interest in themselves and reveling in controlling access. That So Hee's shirt in the dance sequences reads "Stop" is surely no coincidence. Thus, the glamorous world they inhabit encourages jealousy for the attention they receive and power they wield, despite their (mock) protestations that celebrity is tiresome. As the rap climax relates: "All the boys be lovin' me/girls be hatin' me/they will never stop/'cause they know I'm so hot, hot." Nonetheless, even as the video sanctifies obsession with appearance, it impels a reminder that attention is a scarce commodity: Sun Mi, dressed in a cheerleader costume and surrounded by football players, has another woman twirl by and her fickle admirers immediately turn to the newcomer. The video holds out empowerment and insecurity as its dual rewards, because at any moment somebody "so hotter" than thou may come along.

Controlling the male gaze also figures in "Bang!" by After School, which frames the purpose of abandon in dancing as "making the fellows go crazy." A more concerted treatment appears in their song "Ah!" which adds the tease of a relationship between teacher and student and is set in a fantasylike girls' high school (a couch is clearly visible in the classroom). The song has the group members in eroticized school uniforms, presenting themselves to an attractive male teacher for appraisal, certain of their seductive power:

> You've fallen in love with my slender legs and the way I look,
> If I give you a wink you'll fall further
> You think you're special, but how's my body?
> You're going to crumble before me.

As with "So Hot," the potential for empowerment within the song calls itself into question as it derives from unabashed manipulation of desirability, given additional impact by the video's school setting.

2010's "Bad Girl, Good Girl" by Miss-A, one of the most intriguing and successful recent girl group videos, addresses the duality of its title head-on and in doing so inverts the framework of control and conflict found in "So Hot." Here the members proclaim that when they dance, they are "bad girls," but in love they are "good girls," and criticize the hypocrisy of males who are mesmerized by their sexual appeal but then reject them for the negative stereotypes their provocative style calls forth. The video also opens in a high school as one member aggressively knocks a student aside; another grinds her heel into the book he has dropped. In addressing the male gaze

explicitly, the lyrics insist on a distinction between the external and the internal ("you don't know me/so shut up, boy") and lash out at male assertions of patriarchal privilege, portraying them as cowardly:

You couldn't say anything in front of me
But you trash talk me behind my back . . .
Why do you judge me?
Are you afraid of me?
You look at me as if I'm pathetic
But your own staring is ridiculous. . . .
You lose it when you watch me dance
But the hypocritical way you point afterward
Is really ridiculous

The song therefore stands the *naesung* of "So Hot" on its head: instead of dissembling ulterior motives, this song claims that the truer essence lies within. Nonetheless, despite the song's confrontational lyrics, the video renders problematic the appropriation of dancing like a "bad girl" as pure self-expression, as it acquires much of its force from the eroticism of its choreography, noteworthy even by the standards of K-pop, and one cannot escape the fact that the video is a product designed as spectacle to arrest attention. Though explicitly addressed to males and perhaps evoking empathy on the part of women who might be tempted to join in singing "shut up, boy," the song justifies commitment to the increasing demands of the public gaze in Korea's intensely mediated consumer culture: blithe self-commoditization and positive sense of self go hand in hand, even if prejudices need to be addressed. In this light, it is not difficult to see the song as a cynically brilliant strategy on the part of impresario Jin Young Park. What is more difficult, however, is to see the song as genuinely empowering self-expression on the part of a band that includes among its four members two Chinese women who are not native speakers of Korean and then-sixteen-year-old member Suzi (see plate 6).

4Minute, cited above as offering a song professing freedom of choice and addressing females as their primary audience, hold out similarly ambivalent freedoms. Their first single, for example, declares their intention to become a "Hot Issue:"

From head to toe, hot issue
Every single thing about me, hot issue
Take control of everything
I'm always a hot it hot it hot it hot it i-i-i-i-i-i issue . . .

Are you jealous of everything about my style
But you can't copy me so carelessly
If you want, try to follow, try to follow my style

With brash claims to be in control of their destiny, they urge other young women to follow them, but do so within the context of competition that relegates their fans to wannabe status and additionally sees their appeal in terms of contemporary Korean standards of beauty: "my waist is slenderer than yours/I've got long, slim legs."

Their follow-up single "Huh" follows a similar lyrical pattern and speaks of a desire to be famous and determination to ignore naysayers who don't believe they can appear on TV or in magazines or can become better looking: they will, again, act the way they want (*nae mamdaero*). Similarly, "I Me My Mine," whose title could scarcely be more self-centered, also speaks of acting *nae namdaero*. Just as motifs recur in the first set of videos examined above (shyness, thumping heart, for example), so a studied formula emerges in 4Minute's stance (acting to one's desires, being in control, declaration of hotness, encouraging followers). But acting as one wishes for 4Minute means recognizing the tenets of consumer and celebrity culture, and thus their lyrical assertions of control suggest a pseudo-individualization that Adorno would likely have pounced upon.

4Minute's recent video "Heart to Heart" exemplifies a final further category of recurrent videos that deserve consideration here. In this song the group gleefully engages in cruel pranks on the boyfriend of a member who has been caught chatting up girls at a club. In its use of a revenge motif, it resembles both the Wonder Girls' "Irony," which depicts how one member, egged on by the rest, uses a voodoo doll to torment an unfaithful boyfriend, and "I Don't Care" by 2NE1, in which the group triumphantly humiliate cheating boyfriends in front of other women through magical entry into a time-stop world (fig. 14.3). In all three videos "girl power" solidarity draws on a wellspring of wish fulfillment. "I Don't Care" has been described by 2NE1's lead singer CL as providing a warning message to men and advice for women.[24] The song thus exemplifies a change that YG Entertainment executive Jinu Kim describes in recent years: "Lyrically, it used to be: 'Oh, you hurt me so bad, I'm going to curl up in a dark corner and cry my eyes out.' Now, it's like: 'I don't care anymore about you, don't be messing with my heart.'"[25] Nevertheless, it remains worth noting that selfhood is still defined in relation to a validating—albeit rejected—male, that revenge is collectively rather than individually exerted, and that elements of fantasy undercut the possibility of revenge in reality.

Figure 14.3. 2NE1 humiliates cheating boyfriends in front of other women in "I Don't Care," using revenge as a mode of empowerment.

Among girl groups 2NE1 in particular has gained a reputation for feisty independence, and Kim estimates that as much as 70 percent of their fan base is female. This distinctiveness is evident in "Can't Nobody," an ode to partying in which, like Miss-A, they describe themselves as "bad but good." Declaring themselves equipped with an immature charm and fearless youth (*ch'ŏrŏpsŏ kŭge maeryŏgin gŏl, kŏbŏpsŏ nae ch'ŏlmŭmin gŏl*), they are determined to raise the volume and wake up the world because right now they "don't give a fuck." However, among the roughly 100 songs surveyed for this chapter one of only two songs about not recovering well from a breakup comes in fact from 2NE1. Their 2010 hit "Go Away" has a visual narrative of grief after losing a boyfriend, which ends with the race car that CL is driving winding up in a fiery crash. Nonetheless, our invocation of Adorno above does not mean that consumers cannot apply resistant readings to Korean music videos in a manner more reminiscent of Stuart Hall's approach to audience reception: YouTube user comments show that a significant number of fans choose to interpret the narrative in such a way that the crash allows CL to gain revenge upon the boyfriend who has deserted her, because not to do so would conflict with their own internalization of an empowering meaning that the group holds out for them. As the top comment on the English-subbed version of the video read: "Broken heart with ATTITUDE! Like it!"[26]

As we move to the conclusion, it is crucial to underline K-pop's rapid evolution: during the period between when this chapter was composed and it went to press, the restrictive song categories we have sketched were being increasingly challenged and stretched. The group f(x) also deserves particu-

lar consideration in this regard, for their lyrics and videos suggest that SM Entertainment, perhaps surprisingly given the overpowering heteronormativity of their presentation of stable mates Girls' Generation, has left spaces of indeterminacy that allow a queer reading of the former group's material. Moreover, YouTube statistics indicate that f(x) finds resonance above all with young women, virtually without exception, in contrast to other groups discussed, including 2NE1; each of their videos' largest audience has been females in the 13–17, 18–24, and 25–34 age range, respectively.

This ambiguity relies in great part on group member Amber, who has become a beloved figure among K-pop followers precisely for her strikingly androgynous look. It is surely no accident that in a fan video of "Surprise Party" at 1:26–1:36, where the lyrics state, "I want to congratulate you, boy," Amber and fellow band member Sulli have their arms around each other,[27] with Amber looking so boyish as to prompt a double take. Unlike Girls' Generation, who regularly direct their songs to an *oppa*, f(x)'s hit "Nu Abo" begins with an address to an *ŏnni* (the term of address used by a female to an older sister) and has lyrics that may be read as expressing uncertain adolescent sexuality:

> What should I do, *ŏnni*,
> Listen to me for a second
> *ŏnni*, I don't know people
> I'm really eccentric
> People tease me . . .
> Listen to me for a second, *ŏnni*.
> *I'm in the trance*
> What's this feeling now?
> This is the first time for me . . .
>
> It must be love.

Amber's Michael Jacksonesque crotch grab at 2:40, decidedly rare from females in K-pop, as the group sings, "This is how we do it, our love f(x)," along with the video for "Chu," in which the band members give a communal thumbs-down to a male and female couple kissing on television, otherwise unexplained, all reinforce potential for subversive readings.

The unusual territory that f(x) has staked out for itself becomes especially clear when one contrasts their video for the song "Chocolate Love" with the mirrored version by Girls' Generation, as the two impel comparative viewing (each video, itself an advertisement for a Samsung phone, is bookended with excerpts of its counterpart). Whereas the Girls' Generation

version variously has the members solo, in trios, or as an ensemble, playing to the camera in lacy white garb that conveys the formulaic sexy innocence analyzed above, the f(x) video displays the band members in dark, tight-fitting leather. The choreography too is far edgier, with the group frequently intertwined in pairs, their faces close enough to imply coupled intimacy. Adding to this homoerotic tension are more overtly sexual elements than in the Girls' Generation version, including frequent close-ups of the members' erotically swaying hips, the raising and spreading of their legs in quasi-burlesque fashion at 3:15, and, not least, the shot of group member Sulli reclining against Luna, hand draped across Luna's thigh as Luna places her hand on Sulli's shoulder, from 3:27–3:31. The song's lyrics that speak of a hidden, shocking love, in conjunction with the visuals, encourage a Sapphic interpretation if one is prepared to accept its possibility.

CONCLUSION

How ultimately does one then assess the collective effect of a pop phenomenon? In this chapter we have attempted to demonstrate that, despite an official discourse promoting the meteoric rise of girl groups as emblematic of an empowering shift toward an egalitarian society, an analysis of the lyrical and visual codes of girl groups suggests overall a more ambivalent situation. Furthermore, the significantly increased dependence on the female form as a mainstay of popular culture demands a critical reading, even if it alternately suggests such differing strategies as catering to male fantasies of innocent yet willing throngs of young females, a conscious manipulation of the male gaze, or narcissistic self-exploitation directed at same-sex peers that dismisses patriarchy only to careen into the similarly problematic dictates of consumerist late capitalism. Indeed, given the hegemonic social structures of today, it is difficult to see how cultural products can truly empower young women, although glimmers of hope may lie on the horizon.

While the conundrum has appeared at times almost irresolvable, context does play an enormous role: it is important to acknowledge here the, to many, surprising reception of Girls' Generation in Japan, where fans have been overwhelmingly young females. Although we have argued, hopefully cogently, for ways in which Girls' Generation videos treat them as fantasy figures for male consumption within Korea, young Japanese women, as widely reported, have found identification with Korean girl groups empowering, as they see them as role models and evincing a more adult sexuality than homegrown J-pop idols.

Within Korea analysis of the overall effect of the rise of girl groups also requires considering public reaction to the phenomenon as it emerged in

2007, particularly the young age of some performers. While Girls' Generation and the Wonder Girls were hardly the first groups to have members in their mid-teens, an increasingly sexualized presentation, driven by industry pressures, distinguished them from counterparts from a decade previous such as Finkl, Baby vox, and ses. Kim Soo-ah notes that despite initial feminist objections, over time the newfound adult male fandom of this recent surge came to be framed popularly as an avuncular concern for the welfare of the girls, with sexual elements ignored.[28] Indeed, as Kim argues, despite a heated online debate between noted cultural critics Kang Myeong-sok and Yi Gyu-Hyeong, eventually Korean media and society generally found it difficult to acknowledge the possibility of more prurient interests in the sexy presentation of girl groups as a factor in their popularity.[29]

Arguably, this discursive triumph, fostered by the enormous success of the Wonder Girls in 2007, opened a window for sexualization to increase, and, given the logic of the globalized market and contemporary Korean media determination of appropriate roles for women, this objectification has enabled lyrical stances of either innocent passivity or more self-assured declarations of control, but each conjoined with increasingly provocative visual display. Girl groups and their current prominence in Korean popular culture thus intersect here with real life in more serious ways: a 2010 Ministry of Gender Equality and Family investigation found that 60 percent of girl group members admitted to pressure from managers to wear revealing clothing and/or perform dance moves with which they were uncomfortable.[30] In considering the larger effect of their videos within the Korean context, moreover, one should recall the country's score on the United Nations Development Program's 2008 calculation of the "Gender Empowerment Measure," the lowest in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (oecd) and well behind that of many developing nations.[31] Not only has the participation rate of women in the workforce, also consistently among the lowest in the oecd, stagnated at 50 percent or below since the International Monetary Fund (imf) crisis and decreased in the latest global downturn[32]; Korea also stands out as being one of only two oecd countries where employers can legally demand photographs on resumes.[33] In such circumstances, the message that concentration on sexual attractiveness allows a measure of control within a highly competitive society has the effect of co-opting consumers into feeling that they are exercising rational choice in accommodating, rather than challenging, this state of affairs.

Though presented in carefree fashion, girl group videos then are far from apolitical cultural products. The prominent placement in Girls' Generation's "Tell Me Your Wish" video of the drink Meiro Beauty N, which they were

endorsing at the time, underscores the increasing confluence of media and capitalism, with the potential for vested interests in encouraging unhealthy body ideals. In this light, a particularly disturbing aspect of T-ara's video for "Like the First Time" is the intensive weight-losing regimen forced upon the protagonist, Hyomin, in order to prepare for her date. She is seen riding a stationary bicycle frantically, and then she and another of the member of the group cheer when a measuring tape confirms the reduction of her waist size. The video normalizes female complicity in society's surveillance by presenting it as the responsibility of friends to ensure that a peer adapts to the demands of the beauty industry.

The media further exacerbate such effects: a March 2011 episode of *Ranking Show High 5* castigated various girl group members for having sturdy, muscled legs that arose from dancing instead of the slimmer ideal.[34] It then becomes not a far step from the world of music videos and celebrity shows to real life, as performers focus on perceived imperfections with consequent loss of self-esteem and the possibility for serious physical health issues: not only was Hyomin already slim by any standards but also concerns have emerged that she genuinely suffered from anorexia nervosa.[35] Her situation is not unique: the women in Girls' Generation are said to be kept on a diet of 1,200 calories a day by their trainers, and member Seohyun was reportedly 9kg (20 pounds) underweight in February 2011.[36]

The pervasive media determination of ideal body image readily percolates down to the public, and statistics demonstrate a significant acceleration in body dysphoria in this millennium,[37] with increased percentages of women (and, significantly, men as well)[38] seeking plastic surgery as a tool for advancement in a competitive job market; as early as 2002 a study found that fully half of high-school girls in Korea were unable to donate blood because of anemia and malnutrition caused by dieting.[39] Nor it is merely academics who take note; an offhand comment from a YouTube user, on a now-deleted clip of a Girls' Generation song promoting a product, testifies to awareness and resentful acknowledgment of disempowering consumption messages propagated by Korean girl groups:

> "So I just ate a bag of chips. Like, those large bags. Then I came and watched this CF [commercial film] . . . I feel so fat. ;~; excuse me while I go burn all the junk food in my house and go exercise for 10 hours. Soshi [that is, *Sonyŏ shidae*], why must you have such an effect on me? I WANT TO EAT MY FOOD IN PEACE."

And finally, to return once more to the celebratory discourse from *Korea* magazine that initially prompted our investigation of this topic, reason re-

mains to question precisely what form of empowerment is offered by the rise of girl groups in contemporary Korea:

> "Some are so surprised by the elder generation's enthusiasm for girl groups that they cannot help but mention the Lolita complex. Nevertheless, that would be an example of an exaggerated principle that remains from the past authoritarian era. In the course of shifting from a masculine-dominated era to one of feminine equality, the imposing frames of age and gender are being slowly torn down. The time has come in pop culture where a man in his 40s can cheer for teenage girl groups without being looked at suspiciously."[40]

A cynical conclusion is difficult to avoid, as the logic here reaches almost comical proportions: the empowerment present in the rise of girl groups as a phenomenon is not that it brings young women to a heightened sense of their own possibilities in the world, which is mentioned nowhere in the chapter, but rather that Korea's pop culture commodification of sexuality has reached the point that for middle-aged men to focus their gaze on underage performers becomes cause for rejoicing rather than embarrassment. One might reasonably wonder in whose interests a discourse of empowerment is being disseminated.

NOTES

1. For an account of the structural factors that led to the explosion in idol groups in recent years, see Kim Soo-ah, *"Sonyŏ imiji ŭi pulgŏrihwa wa sobi pangshik ŭi kusŏng: sonyŏ kŭrup ŭi samch'on p'aen tamnon kusŏng," Midiŏ, jendŏ wa munhwa* 15 (2010): 79–119; and Shin Hyun-joon, *"K-pop ŭi munhwajŏngch'ihak," ŏllon kwa sahoe* 13, no. 3 (2005): 7–36.
2. The term *yŏsŏng kŭrup* (female group) has been in circulation longer than *kŏl kŭrup* but never achieved widespread currency.
3. Bomi Lim, "S. Korea Renews Propaganda with Pop Song, Eating Advice," Bloomberg News, May 24, 2010, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010–05–24/south-korean-song-blasted-into-north-as-propaganda-war-revived-on-sinking.html.
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5. Kang Kyŏng-nok, *"Han aidol 'Ilyŏldo chŏmryŏng,' ilbon chot'ohwashikida," Ashia Kyŏngje*, August 26, 2010, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.asiae.co.kr/news/view.htm?idxno=2010082608205252860&sp=EC.
6. See, for example, Daum Yŏnye, *"Kara sat'ae hallyu kwoench'anhna ajik chikchŏpchŏgin t'agyŏk ŏpta,"* February 22, 2011, accessed March 27, 2011, http://media.daum.net/entertain/enews/view?newsid=20110222072404743.

7. Jeong, "Swept Up," 48.
8. Nam Chi-ŭn, *"Mommaeman poinŭn kŏl kŭrup 'kwayŏl' shidae," The Hankyoreh*, August 30, 2010, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/entertainment/437420.html; Kim Pong-hyŏn, *"'Sekshihan' sonyŏ shidae choahanŭn ke choeingayo?" Pressian*, February 4, 2010, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.pressian.com/article/article.asp?article_num=60100203164550&section=04.
9. See, for example, Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); and Julie Andsager and Kimberly Roe, "'What's Your Definition of Dirty, Baby?' Sex in Music Video," *Sexuality & Culture* 7, no. 3 (2003): 79–97.
10. For example, Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Soyoung Kim, "Do Not Include Me in Your 'Us': Peppermint Candy and the Politics of Difference." *Korea Journal* 46, no. 1 (2006): 60–83.
11. English language exceptions include Hoon-Soon Kim, "Korean Music Videos, Postmodernism, and Gender Politics," in *Feminist Cultural Politics in Korea*, ed. Jung-hwa Oh (Seoul: Prunsasang Publishing, 2005), 195–227; Heather Willoughby, "Image Is Everything: The Marketing of Femininity in Korean Pop Music," in *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*, ed. Keith Howard (Folkestone, U.K.: Global Oriental, 2006), 99–108; and Eun-Young Jung, "Playing the Race and Sexuality Cards in the Transnational Pop Game: Korean Music Videos for the U.S. Market," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 22, no. 2 (2010): 219–36. For Korean work specifically on girl groups in addition to Kim, *"Sonyŏ imiji,"* see Ch'a U-jin, *"Kŏl kŭrup chŏnsŏnggi," Munhwa pipyŏng* 59 (2009): 270–83. Lee Dong-yeon's edited collection *Aidol: H.O.T.esŏ sonyŏshidaekkaji, aidol munhwa pogosŏ* (Seoul: Imaejin, 2011) appeared too late for the authors to take into close consideration.
12. On the *kkonminam*, see especially Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011). On Harisu, see Gloria Davies, M. E. Davies, and Young-A Cho, "Hallyu Ballyhoo and Harisu: Marketing and Representing the Transgendered in South Korea," in *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power, and East Asia*, ed. D. Black, S. Epstein, and A. Tokita (Monash University ePress, 2010), 09.1–09.12.
13. On blurred gender roles, see Myoung Hye Kim, "Woman to Be Seen but Not to Be Heard: Representation of Woman in the Contemporary Korean Movie *My Wife Is a Gangster*" (paper presented at the Twenty-Third Conference of IAMCR, Gender and Communication Section, Barcelona, Spain, July 21–26, 2002); and Stephen Epstein, "The Masculinization of (Women in) Korean Cinema?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, San Francisco, California, April 2006). For an account of female sexual subjectivity in 1990s film, see So-hee Lee, "The Concept of Female Sexuality in Korean Popular Culture," in *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 141–64.
14. Kim, "Korean Music Videos," 195.
15. Evan Ramsted, "YouTube Helps South Korean Band Branch Out," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2011, accessed March 27, 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article

/SB10001424052748704458204576073663148914264.html; Ja-young Yoon, "YouTube Taking Hallyu on International Ride," *Korea Times*, February 8, 2011, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2011/02/123_81039.html.

16. Phillip Vannini and Scott M. Myers, "Crazy About You: Reflections on the Meanings of Contemporary Teen Pop Music," *Electronic Journal of Sociology* (2002), accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.sociology.org/content/vo1006.002/vannini_myers.html.
17. J. Brown and L. Schultz, "The Effect of Race, Gender, and Fandom on Audience Interpretations of Madonna's Music Videos," *Journal of Communication* 40 (1990): 88–102. An anecdote reveals a variety of interpretation in the Korean context: one coauthor conducted a blind survey of his contemporary Asian society class, asking whether students found the Wonder Girls' "So Hot" video primarily empowering, degrading, funny, obnoxious, ironic, or none of the above. All six answers generated multiple responses.
18. Kim, "Korean Music Videos," 195–96.
19. Ch'a, *Kŏl kŭrup chŏnsŏng shidae*, 273.
20. For a YouTube playlist that incorporates the videos referred to in this chapter in order, see http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=B1C588AD8DCCB5D6.
21. One might also consider how the notion of "living dolls" structures the depiction of Girls' Generation; 2011 witnessed the debut of the unsubtly named girl group 5Dolls. Compare Aljosa Puzar, "Asian Dolls and the Western Gaze: Notes on the Female Dollification in South Korea," *Asian Women* 27, no. 2 (2011): 81–111.
22. Kim, "Korean Music Videos," 222.
23. For more on the rise of such a cultural turn within Korean society, see Joanna Elfving-Hwang, *Representations of Femininity in Contemporary South Korean Literature* (Folkestone, U.K.: Global Oriental, 2009), 140–41.
24. Yoon Hee-Seong and Wee Geun-woo, "[Interview] 2NE1," *Ashia Kyŏngje*, September 9, 2009, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.asiae.co.kr/news/view.htm?sec=ent9&idxno=2009090316583528776.
25. "Hip Korea," Discovery Channel, March 2010, accessed March 27, 2011, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hr2sOwBGwG8.
26. User Xiu91 on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iABwt-B111E. Accessed March 27, 2011.
27. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG00c7PvWrM. Accessed March 27, 2011.
28. Kim, *"Sonyŏ imiji."*
29. Kim, *"'Sekshihan' sonyŏ shidae."*
30. *"Haksupkwŏn poho mihup tung ch'ŏngsonyŏn yŏnyein kibongwŏn ch'imhae shimgak,"* Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, accessed March 27, 2011, http://enews.moge.go.kr/view/board/bbs/view.jsp?topMenuId=NEWS&topMenuName=%B4%BA%BD%BA%B8%B6%B4%E7&subMenuId=1&subMenuName=%C1%A4%C3%A5%B.C.%D3%BA%B8&boardMngNo=1&boardNo=1545.
31. "S. Korea Drops to 68th in Women's Rights," *The Hankyoreh*, March 10, 2009, accessed March 27, 2011, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/343215.html.

32. Yoo-Sun Kim, *Working Korea 2007* (Seoul: Korea Labor and Society Institute, 2008), 19; Hyo-sik Lee, "Downturn Takes Toll on Women Workers," *Korea Times*, July 6, 2009, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2009/07/123_48021.html.
33. Chŏng Chae-sŏk, *"Iryŏksŏ e 'sajin' toech'ukdoelkka," Focus Busan*, June 9, 2010, 6.
34. Available at http://ystar.cu-media.co.kr/news/news_view.php?no=43773, accessed March 27, 2011.
35. "T-ara's Hyomin Has a Terrible Body?" *allkpop*, May 26, 2010, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.allkpop.com/2010/05/t-aras-hyomin-has-a-terrible-body; "T-ara Fans Worried about Hyomin's Weight Loss," *hellokpop*, January 6, 2011, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.hellokpop.com/2011/01/06/t-ara-fans-worried-about-hyomins-weight-loss.
36. "SNSD's Trainers Clear Up Their Diet," *allkpop*, December 20, 2009, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.allkpop.com/2009/12/snsds_trainers_clear_up_their_diet; "Seohyeon's Health Report Reveals She Is 9kg Underweight," *koreaboo*, February 6, 2011, accessed March 27, 2011, http://www.koreaboo.com/index.html/_/general/seohyuns-health-report-reveals-she-is-9kg-r3326.
37. Y. H. Khang and S. C. Yun, "Trends in General and Abdominal Obesity among Korean Adults: Findings from 1998, 2001, 2005, and 2007," *Journal of Korean Medical Science* 25, no. 11 (2010): 1587.
38. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QovjzfdDx7c, accessed March 27, 2011.
39. Minjeong Kim and Sharron Lennon, "Content Analysis of Diet Advertisements: A Cross-National Comparison of Korean and U.S. Women's Magazines," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 24, no. 4 (2006): 357.
40. Jeong, "Swept Up," 48.