

**Tomboy in Love:
Korean and U.S. Views of Heterosexual
Eroticism in the K-Drama
*First Shop of Coffee Prince***

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Abstract

This paper uses close analysis, fan interviews and comments, auto-ethnography, an interview with the director, and cultural comparison to analyze the South Korean mainstream representation of a feminine-inflected, non-normative heterosexuality in the eroticism and desiring of the drama's tomboy lead. Countering the prevalence in U.S. mainstream movies and television to represent a coitus-driven eroticism in romance plots, the K-drama tomboy's polymorphous pleasures and a possible misreading of the discretion involved in the courtship conducted between the tomboy and the pretty boy can appeal to certain U.S. viewers who self-define as women. Even with additional and different cultural referents involved in reception, some Korean women viewers at home and abroad can be drawn to the tomboy's eroticism as well as her hard-working and independent qualities. Primarily *Coffee Prince* is read in this essay for what it can represent for different women viewers in terms of one of many non-normative heterosexualities not usually depicted in more Hollywood-derived global mainstream media culture.

Keywords: East Asian androgyny, feminine androgyny, *First Shop of Coffee Prince*, Korean drama, Lee Yun Jeong, mainstream media, non-normative heterosexuality, polymorphous eroticism, tomboy, U.S. viewers of Korean dramas

Introduction

In episode 4 of the now-classic drama *First Shop of Coffee Prince* (2007), there's a sweat-drenched roughhousing scene between the male lead Han Gyeol and tomboy Eun Chan as they compete in basketball under the hot Seoul sun, each refusing to give up. They climb on each other, block each other. The scene has a playfulness that is erotic. For many viewers, this and other tightly physical scenes between Han Gyeol and Eun Chan are romantic in ways that connect friendship with love and erotic in ways that involve play and the whole body.

Such roughhousing scenes are unlike the gamboling commonly seen in other popular Korean dramas where the male protagonist so often wrist-grabs the female and pulls her into date-like activities like ferris wheel rides (although there are some wrist-grabs in *Coffee Prince* too). In contrast, most of Han Gyeol and Eun Chan's romping is wild, no holds barred, and would be traditionally categorized as masculine, as in playing casual sports with no referee present or letting loose during a drinking night out. Han Gyeol is a man. He thinks Eun Chan is a man. She's not; she's a woman. Her tomboy-style in clothes, aided by disguise elements like her binding her breasts, conveys her feminine masculinity. Because we viewers know she's passing as a man, we see how it's socially acceptable for her to sweat and climb on Han Gyeol in public in the middle of the day in Seoul. Because she's been living as a tomboy, she's strong and athletic and not used to holding back. The masquerade as a man, and the identity as a tomboy, these together give her license. What kind of license? I argue in this essay that her corporeal, desiring performativity is perceivable as a license for feminine-inflected pleasure in non-normative heterosexuality.

This essay looks at the tomboy in *Coffee Prince* and at the perception of her among female viewers in Korea and the U.S. I'm employing *Coffee Prince* as a case study for relational comparison around issues of erotics, reception, and heterosexualities among different viewers who self-define as women.¹ At this time, *Coffee Prince* is well known for its gender-confusion plot and somewhat open discussions by the characters of homosexuality as well as heterosexuality; it's also recognized as one of the early tomboy-protagonist TV dramas in Korea,

following other related plots in Japanese dramas and in manga and manhwa. Within this context, my analytical goal is to consider how Eun Chan's sexuality exemplifies a non-normative heterosexuality for mass media and what this might mean for Korean and U.S. female viewers.

The drama is comprised of 17 one-hour episodes. *Coffee Prince's* basic plot is that Go Eun Chan, the 24-year-old working-class female protagonist, played by Yoon Eun Hye, masquerades as a young man in order to get a job and earn better money than she could as a woman. We see her in the first episodes cobbling together a living from many part-time jobs. In one discussion in the first episode, her employer at the restaurant tells her he has hired a woman to save money. In fact, money is tight for Eun Chan. Various machinations ensue, and Eun Chan gets hired at a full-time job as a male waiter by a café, run by the handsome 29-year-old Choe Han Gyeol played by the actor Gong Yu. Han Gyeol is from the rich family that owns the café and the large Dongin Foods Company. This all would roll out as a typical Cinderella K-drama plot, except that Eun Chan and Han Gyeol become friends, with Han thinking the cute tomboy is really a man. They cavort together, and gradually and with great sensuality fall in love, which causes Han Gyeol who always before this had thought of himself as heterosexual great distress as he realizes he's falling in love with someone he thinks is a man. We see his longing, his fun, his attraction, his fear, his anger. We also see his friends support him and urge him to adopt a positive attitude toward homosexuality. Meanwhile Eun Chan stays masqueraded and apparently tongue-tied on the subject of her gender, afraid to lose her job and her friendship with Han Gyeol if she speaks up. She doesn't think she's the kind of woman either in terms of class or femininity who would appeal to him. Since its first airing in Korea in 2007, *Coffee Prince* has enjoyed great Korean and international popularity.

In this essay, both Korean and U.S. viewers are included as recipient examples of contra-flows from a powerful and influential regional media center, Seoul, at one time on the margins of the profitable global entertainment business, to what is still a center (but no longer the only center)—the United States.² Primarily, in considering different fields of

reception, my questions are these: What might the tomboy, her physicality and her erotics, mean to the primarily female viewers of different cultural backgrounds who watch her? In considering these questions, I use fan site comments, in-person interviews, interview questionnaires, an exchange with the director of *Coffee Prince*, and also auto-ethnography. The exploration is less about teasing out which elements of this reception montage belong to which culture and much more about considering examples of Korean and U.S. reception of a tomboy figure who potentially means so much to viewers as an independent, fresh, appealing, hard working, and innocent yet also erotically desiring and physical woman. I argue that the consumption of *Coffee Prince* can involve, for viewers who so choose, an eroticism of a non-normative heterosexuality, and that this, along with other instances of expansions and diversifications of mass culture representation of heterosexual desire, is significant in contributing to a redressing of a lack in public discourse around the range of heterosexualities and their pleasures for hetero women.³ Although clearly promoting heterosexuality, mass culture—within a narrow window of possibilities—is problematic in its repetitive articulation, seeming to foreclose other possibilities in public discourse. In mainstream American movies and TV, it is commonly acknowledged that romantic plot developments are so focused on coitus as a looming goal that, oddly enough, the focus on this sex can close off a range of alternative erotic sensualities. Of the many examples of the “jumping into bed” plots in American mass media, *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girls* come quickly to mind. In analyzing *Coffee Prince* for its representation of a polymorphous eroticism, I’m not simply looking at, say, more room for foreplay, but instead a complex and not necessarily goal-oriented polymorphous desiring. And *Coffee Prince* comes as part of a context of Korean TV depictions of the tomboy.⁴

The Tomboy

In Korea, a tomboy (English word used) commonly signifies a woman who has a boyish fashion style. In Korean culture, the word “tomboy”

does not mean “a lesbian.” Regionally, though, and in particular in the different urban cultures of Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan, the English word “tomboy” or “T” and its related visual styles can have a spectrum of meanings, from the most alternative, that is, butch lesbian to a merely commodified tomboy look. That spectrum is not comprised of neatly separable identities, however; and overlaps and ambiguities can exist.

In Korean TV dramas, the tomboy is usually a twentysomething, short-haired, hard-working woman. She is seen as acting in defiance, at least for a certain period of her life, against heteronormative marriage goals—usually she is more interested in working than in landing a fiance. As the drama unfolds, however, she is nevertheless shown to be attracted by and attractive to the beautiful male lead. She is highlighted as a sturdy, cute, and subtly eroticized working girl. A pragmatism is part of the character; short hair can imply a readiness for the workplace. And Eun Chan, the tomboy in *Coffee Prince* (and others modeled after her), is also very sensual and desiring, even exuberantly erotic, although she doesn't seem that way at first. This kind of tomboy is popular abroad.

In Feb. 2012, Arirang TV's *Showbiz Korea*, which is seen in 188 countries including the U.S., conducted a three-week poll on its homepage asking viewers to pick their favorite Korean TV drama. 2,024 international viewers responded.⁵ The K-drama *Secret Garden* (2010) won first place with 16.1 percent of the vote, and in descending order were *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *You're Beautiful* (2009), *Coffee Prince* (2007), *Princess Hours* (2006), and *Seonggyunggan Scandal* (2010).⁶ *Secret Garden's* female lead is an athletic stunt woman who has a romance (and changes bodies) with a rich man; the main character in *Boys Over Flowers* is a schoolgirl who is also an athlete and who strongly influences four wealthy boys in a private school for the better, while two of them fall in love with her; *You're Beautiful* stars a tomboy who has to disguise herself as a man and has a romance with a rock star; *Coffee Prince* stars a tomboy who has to disguise herself as a man to get a job and has a romance with a coffee company heir; *Princess Hours* has a more feminine lead but she is the same actress, Yoon Eun-hye, who plays the tomboy in *Coffee Prince*; and *Seonggyunggan Scandal* is a

historical drama starring a female lead who has to disguise herself as a man in order to get jobs and education. In different ways, whether through female athleticism or a boyish look or disguising themselves as men, the main female characters are all tomboys.⁷ Although most female K-drama leads are still long-haired and overtly feminine, these are from the subset who are tomboys. These tomboy dramas (among others, particularly historical dramas) are popular internationally. As one 28-year-old Vietnamese-American fan put it about such female characters in K-dramas, “I like characters that are strong willed and aggressive but can still maintain their charm.”⁸ Of note, too, the K-drama tomboy heroines, while sometimes infantilized, are very much absorbed in navigating the adult world of work, romance, and sexuality.

What might the tomboy—particularly this Korean-tomboy pastiche—mean to viewers outside as well as inside Korea? The popularity of the tomboy in this Arirang poll parallels my own American taste in K-dramas and that of interviewees in the U.S. I talked with or polled. Although the strongest audiences for Korean Wave or Hallyu exports are in East Asia and Southeast Asia, as has been well documented, there are now increasing numbers of fans in Latin America, the Middle East, the U.S., Europe, and around the globe.⁹ Since the noughties, English-subtitled Korean TV dramas have become easily available in the United States on web sites such as Viki.com, YouTube.com, and Hulu.com (and they have been available since the 1980s on cable TV on stations aimed at a Korean diaspora audience and have also been seen via Dish Network Satellite TV since 2001). With the circulation of English-subtitled Korean dramas online, an American audience once assumed to be a Korean diasporic one has greatly diversified. In fact, in her research on the fan-subbing site Viki.com (whose most popular content consists of Korean-dramas and Mandarin-language-dramas), cultural critic Sun Jung reports that 25 percent of Viki’s users are Caucasian North Americans.¹⁰ Jung has also analyzed the Korean entertainment news and gossip site Allkpop.com, founded in 2007 by Paul Han and Johnny Noh. Jung quotes Noh when he estimates that about 40 percent of the site’s users are from the U.S., with the other 60 percent spread out across the globe. Of all the site

users, “39 percent are Asian, 39 percent Caucasian, 13 percent Hispanic, 8 percent African American, and 1 percent other.”¹¹

In my own in-person interviews and email exchanges, conducted mainly in 2012 and 2014, with viewers born in Korea and others born in the U.S., I spoke with a diverse sampling of fans—who although from different ethnic backgrounds were all drawn to the tomboy characters. As one 25-year-old Anglo-American fan in Bowling Green, Ohio, put it, “I love the dramas where the main female character is a strong girl with personality and spunk, compared to the dramas where she is a quiet, gentle girl that things just happen to. *Coffee Prince* and *Secret Garden* are two of my favorites because the main characters are strong women who take care of themselves and in the case of *Coffee Prince*, her mother and sister as well.... I like to see the female characters dominating in a man’s role and all the entertaining and interesting issues that arise related to gender and sexuality.”¹² And a Vietnamese-American fan in Chicago expressed further appreciation for the cross-dressing romance in *Coffee Prince*, “I like the fact that a heterosexual male fell in love with another person despite his/her gender. It shows that he truly loves her for her. It is a sweet love story of his struggle to overcome his denial in order to be with the person he loves.”¹³ So there is fan interest not only in the tomboy persona, but also in what the tomboy does, and in the affect she elicits in others. What is more, Eun Chan can be read as someone beyond gender, and the love between Eun Chan and Han Gyeol as one transcending gender. As viewer Kim A. posted on hulu.com/coffee-prince, “This was a great drama. While watching some questions came to mind. What is gender and what is sexuality? While watching the drama Go Eun Chan’s gender did not seem to be an issue. The friendship and love she and Choi Han Gyeol had, seemed to transcend gender. They were no longer man and man or man and woman, but they were two people who genuinely cared about each other and gender did not dictate their feelings for each other.”¹⁴

Along with the major continued interest in the trans-Asia market and other regions, Korean mass culture industries also aim at the large U.S. market.¹⁵ And although there are frustrations and ambivalences here—some products and launches have been successful, while others

have not; there appears to be no working formula for success in breaking into this market—there is also something quite satisfying about the growth in popularity of Korean TV dramas and music groups in the U.S. This kindles the fantasy that the U.S. economic penetration of the South Korean market—begun so violently with the Cold War-instigated Korean War (1950-53), followed by U.S. aid in the 1950s to the war-torn and then-poor country—might now be reversed, even if partially. South Korea has gone from being one of the poorest countries in the world in the 1950s to rising, from the 1960s through today, to being the 18th largest economy in the world and the 12th in purchasing power. U.S. culture in the form of Hollywood movies still dominates the East Asian mass media scene and Korea by itself isn't likely to reverse the flow completely.¹⁶ But K-Pop, in its massive popularity in the first decade of the noughties and on, has suggested to many East Asians that Hollywood is no longer the only production hub for global mass culture.¹⁷

From my own U.S. perspective, I think of these desires for viewing cultural productions from regions other than one's own as opening or re-opening imaginaries of erotic desire in the self that far from Orientalisms past are not (necessarily—no doubt different for different viewers) primarily linked to power structures of desiring the exotic other. Instead, these desires function instead to spotlight explorations and broadenings of the erotic self. Through translating, mistranslating, and fantasizing, they can even be used to imagine a sensibility for the self outside the repressive hierarchies of one's own home culture. Here, media critic Henry Jenkins's definition of a "pop cosmopolitan" is useful: "someone whose embrace of global popular media represents an escape route out of the parochialism of her local community."¹⁸ Emphasizing that "a growing proportion of the popular culture that Americans consume comes from elsewhere, especially Asia," Jenkins expresses hope that "[c]osmopolitans embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience."¹⁹ In terms of sexualities and genders we can wonder if this cultural consumption can fuel imaginings outside of localized hierarchies.

For U.S.-based women of a range of ethnicities, how might such self-definitions and/or longing for the cloak of cosmopolitanism function in the consumption of cultural products like dramas? Here Mica Nava's work exploring the "emotional and libidinal economics of identification and desire" that are "the foundational elements of twenty-first century urban cosmopolitan imaginaries" is helpful.²⁰ Particularly for women who can feel marginalized, a desire to identify with an other can transcend Orientalism and move toward an affective sense of belonging to an imaginary cosmopolitan culture that seems somehow more fair or at least more open to new possibilities.

In applying Nava's ideas to mass culture transnational circulation, a terrain ripe for viewer projections and misreadings, I want to honor those misreadings, at least those that connect to an empathetic cosmopolitanism. In fact, viewing a fantasy drama produced in a culture that seems in some ways far from one's own home culture and that derives from a place one might never travel to, can lead to all sorts of imaginings. The ones that interest me are those that link to an empathetic cosmopolitanism and a desire to escape an unfair gender hierarchy and/or economic system at home. About these, I'd argue that authenticity is beside the point and instead the affective traces of hope that might be stirred from a misreading of a culture and one of its fantasies might be a more useful focus for feminist critical writing. In addition we can consider how hope is also rooted in the body and connected to erotics and affect in viewing. Fruitfully, there is a range of erotics that the tomboy dramas can elicit, and a range of viewers to which these appeal.

Coffee Prince, Eroticism, and Feminized Androgyny

What kind of erotics are suggested in the coupling of the tomboy and the pretty boy? And how might an identification with these foster a kind of empathetic cosmopolitanism? To explore further the kind of erotic and intimate connections available for different viewers, I toggle back and forth between Korea and the U.S. to consider the responses of both Korean and U.S. female viewers (and also, to blur categories—a helpful

reminder of the contemporary nonstatic condition of both viewers and media texts—Korean citizens studying in the U.S.) as they follow such a couple in the K-drama *First Shop of Coffee Prince*. In particular, *Coffee Prince* showcases a romance centered on a tomboy protagonist performing a feminine-inflected androgyny, that is, one that mixes feminine and masculine signifiers but is inflected toward femininity in mass entertainment. In Korea, the seeming innocence and playfulness of Eun Chan's character may influence erotic identification with her heterosexual desiring of Han Gyeol in a context where young women are only supposed to admit to inexperience (or relative inexperience) sexually.²¹ This can engender its own kind of misreadings of this sexualized romance: As a 30-year-old Korean woman remembers back to her younger reactions when she first watched *Coffee Prince*, "Han Gyeol grew up lonely in a rich family, so Eun Chan has been [able to] play a role of little brother (later sister) to him."

That said, not all identifications with Eun Chan, of course, need be about her eroticism. And yet, these identifications are worth considering in that they may enhance identifications with that aspect of her character too. In a Korean context, Eun Chan can appeal in terms of personality and brave pragmatism. The same 30-year-old Korean woman, now studying marketing in graduate school in Chicago, wrote in response to questions I circulated, "Eun Chan appears as a tomboy in 'real life'! Androgynous, independent. Strong and courageous enough to perform another sex to financially support her home."²² Another Korean graduate student in Chicago, this person studying media, age 26, who remembers watching and liking *Coffee Prince* when it was first broadcast and how much everyone she knew talked about it, describes Eun Chan as "a type of girl who has to pretend to be a man to make a living. Usually, salaries are higher for men and there are more jobs available for male."²³ These comments point to the gendered wage gap in Korea, as well as gender segregation in occupational areas, both of which underline the stark economics of performing gender and earning a living in Korean society.²⁴

Aired in 2007 by the media conglomerate MBC (Munwha Broadcasting Company), *Coffee Prince* marked the first time MBC had

employed a woman to direct one of its TV dramas—Lee Yun Jeong.²⁵ The screenwriter Lee Jeong Ah (pen name for Lee Seon Mi) is also female; and she is the author as well of the light novel of the same title on which the TV adaptation was based. (The fact that both the PD and the writer are female does not necessarily have to result in a complex and engaging approach to femininity in a trendy drama, but as it happened, in the case of *Coffee Prince*, it did.) In an email interview with the director of *Coffee Prince*, Lee Yun Jeong addressed the connections between Eun Chan’s masculine attributes and her role as a breadwinner:

CP started from the writer Lee Seon Mi’s novel of the same title. When I first met with LSM, I asked her to tell me about the novels she had written. She . . . talked about CP. I think she started the story like this: “There is this girl with a male-like appearance whose name is Go Eun Chan. She is her family’s breadwinner who supports her mother and younger sister—a girl with a strong sense of responsibility. This kid eats a lot and she is strong which betrays her slim body. One day a coffee shop that hires only good-looking men opens in her neighborhood and . . .” Listening to her up to this point I was already convinced that this would make a very amusing TV drama. The character Eun Chan just jumped into my heart. That she eats a lot unlike average women (she neglects her appearance, which means femininity is not so important to her), that she has a strong sense of responsibility (she’s not a weak girl who seeks protection), and that she is physically strong (which suggests the character’s humor)—I believed things like these would make a very new kind of drama.²⁶

As for interpretations of the erotics represented in the drama, the range was greater for the Korean women I interviewed. They understood the trans-media references (such as to Boys’ Love *manga* and *manwha*, with their own kind of boy-on-boy romping) and potential connections to these in the drama, whereas the Anglo-American interviewees, even those with accumulated cultural capital about Korean popular culture,

tended not to. As the 26-year-old, Korean-born media artist, who identifies as heterosexual, continues, “I [first] watched it on TV. I was in [Incheon], Korea, just graduated from high school.... I liked it. It expanded the visual spectrum of cool urban males. There was the sarcastic, funny one, the innocent macho, the mysterious pony tail, etc., besides an arrogant, rich, handsome prince.” As for Eun Chan’s character, there was a strong link visible to Japanese *shojo* culture and cuteness aesthetics there and in Korea, “She is not perfect, rather clumsy. (You want to protect her.) Not beautiful but cute and loveable, typical manga protagonist character for *shojo manga*. I was busy projecting myself into Eun Chan’s character ... I am sure every girl did.... And, yes, I did find it erotic.”²⁷ As many have reported, Eun Chan was so popular when the drama was first broadcast that the character started a trend among college girls in Korea for cutting their hair short.

With or without a full understanding of the cultural references, though, the androgynous ambiguity of *Coffee Prince’s* eroticism can be appealing to read in a U.S. context. The tightly-scripted quick rush to coitus in many U.S. mass media productions should be seen as hand-in-hand with a tendency to gender and sexual categorical rigidities as performed in public. Despite great academic and activist interest in trans-gender issues (and in the issue of potential gender mutability), daily practices of highly legible, nonambiguous public displays of gender and sexual identity are common. The relationship between self-articulating sexuality and the public visibility of sexual identity is quite different in the U.S., even accounting for many different American subcultures, than it is in Korea. While hetero-marital life is a norm in both places, a self-styling of sexual category displayed in public, punctuated by public displays of affection and sexuality, is more common in the U.S. (although minoritarian self-categorizing is mainly of high public visibility in cities, not rural or small town milieus). In general, for heterosexuals in Korea and elsewhere in East Asia, Neo-Confucianist traditions discourage *publicly* articulating and enacting sexuality. This is a complex cultural subject, but a colloquial way of making my point is to simply say that at this cultural moment a pedestrian in Chicago is more likely to see heterosexual couples making

out on park benches than she would heterosexual couples acting similarly in Seoul (although same-gender physical affection that denotes friendship—such as hand holding—is more accepted in Korea). Here, I want to note for all sexualities a degree of discretion in Korean culture about public articulations of sexuality—and to think about how such discretion as it's represented in Korean mass culture might play out for viewers outside Korea.

In Korean mass culture, this discretion (some might say repression; I mean to articulate nonjudgementalism, though, here in this regard) in public modes of dress and behavior and the further translation of these to screen fantasies can have, as fans have commented, an unexpectedly liberating impact on an American viewer. Exaggeratedly, in their K-drama world, Eun Chan and Han Gyeol are especially discreet for the majority of *Coffee Prince's* episodes due to Han Gyeol's confusion about Eun Chan's gender and his own sexuality, so the erotic tension between them is shown with great subtlety. This can be intriguing for American fans. As fan Dakota Harris writes on Hulu.com/coffee-prince, "Hot, hot, HOT! Wow is it just me or is it warm in here? I love these K dramas for the fact they can create such sexual tensions (read: hot!) without resorting to any nudity. It's a refreshing change from American TV, which just throws people in to bed. Here they've created more tension, more heat, more excitement and they've barely even kissed!"²⁸

The androgynous East Asian representations of tomboys in mainstream media can feel suggestive of fluid gender possibilities and can even in some cases seem to offer a temporary freedom from sexual categorization. Lived experience in different East Asian cultures suggests otherwise, particularly in light of government and societal prohibitions, but such foreign misreadings of freedoms can be valuable too. They can stir empathetic cosmopolitanisms. And Eun Chan's tomboy character is appealing to identify with cross-culturally. As a 19-year-old Anglo-American student who identifies as bisexual put it, "I really enjoyed the depth and complexity of her character. I related to her even though I wasn't experiencing the exact same struggles as her."²⁹

In an interview with the writer Lee Seon Mi, published online on the Korean *Newsen* site on Aug. 24, 2007, the novelist and scriptwriter

explained her priorities in the *Coffee Prince* script: “Female transvestite is not new; it appears even in Shakespeare classics. To be honest, it would be more accurate to say that it [female transvestitism] is used in this drama as an apparatus to show women’s fantasy in the process of portraying Eun Chan’s love story.”³⁰ She credits director Lee Yun Jeong with creating the romantic details of the beach scene and other more playful interactions, and also her involving the actors in these dynamics as well. “Lee Yun Jeong PD, who is known as the Detail Queen, knows exactly what fantasies women want, from their standpoint. She wants to portray feelings of life in more daring and detailed ways by discussing with the actors on the sets.”³¹ Director Lee Yun Jeong specifies, “I could really feel their [EC and HG’s] playfulness, curiosity, and excitement—perhaps because it was a love made possible by Eun Chan’s artlessness. Eun Chan, unlike average [heterosexual] women, doesn’t only receive and react to men’s emotions, but acknowledges and expresses her own emotions as they are—I think this is what gave their romance a fresh charm.”³²

And writer Lee Seon Mi adds an additional context, “Actually, a love story between a tomboy-masqueraded-as-a-man and a *kkonminam* is familiar material in romance novels and *sunjeong* [“pure-love”] *manhwa* that has been reproduced in many different ways. Though this is the first time it has appeared in a TV drama on a public network, the audience seems to have received it well and with an interest, as it also engages with the code of homosexuality that has recently emerged as a trend in pop culture.”³³

Coffee Prince was one of the first TV dramas in Korea to deal with matters of homosexuality; and this is what it’s famous for, even though, predictably at the end, Eun Chan’s gender as a woman is discovered, and, after further machinations, she and Han Gyeol become a heterosexual couple accepted by both of their families. And it’s important for spotlighting changing attitudes, ones that have just begun to change publicly in South Korea, toward homosexuality. However, for me as a viewer, the fascination is *Coffee Prince*’s brilliant and less-discussed exploration of how the drama represents erotic feminine-inflected

fantasies of a polymorphous heterosexuality not limited to a coitus-dominated heteronormativity.

Polymorphous Heterosexuality

Here, I want to turn to auto-ethnography, that is, my own intense enjoyment of the drama, in the context of the eroticisms and views of the depicted romance by Korean-born and U.S.-born interviewees and fan comments discussed. In doing so, I want to trace another thread from the enactment of Eun Chan's seeming innocent or playful interactions with Han Gyeol. As an American, a heterosexual woman, and a baby boomer, who came of age just after the sexual revolution and its emphasis on "doing it," i.e., intercourse, what Eun Chan's adventure represents to me is a fantasy of prioritizing the enjoyment of sexuality throughout the whole body.³⁴ I would hazard that cross-culturally, the connections between Eun Chan as a desiring heterosexual woman and her own physicality as a tomboy might play out differently for different viewers in different locales. Yet at the same time, to go in depth into my individual reading may offer a self-reflexive way to enter the range of responses so as not to be too reductive about any of them. In other words, here I slow down the analysis to consider fine-tuned connections between tomboyism in this Korean context and a fantasy of polymorphous heterosexuality, delineating the idea that individual fan responses, as expressed online or in interviews, can be also the tips of a larger iceberg of complex considerations of the erotic and romantic yearnings well covered by fan enthusiasms, exclamation points, and ironies—but potentially there nonetheless. I am a fan of *Coffee Prince*, and I love the polymorphous play in it.

In contemporary language, "polymorphous sexuality," or in classic Freudian language, "polymorphous perversity," can be defined as "the ability to find erotic pleasure out of any part of the body."³⁵ Various writers have associated polymorphous sexuality with infants or with women or with adults of any gender who tend this way.³⁶ It can also be seen as a sexual difference leveler and/or associated somehow with homosexuality.³⁷ Yun Eun Hye's performance of Eun Chan in *Coffee*

Prince, for me, embodies a polymorphous sexuality, and one that can be particularly alluring to those who self-define as heterosexual women to view.

Eun Chan romps with her whole body at moments throughout *Coffee Prince*. Either alongside or usually engaged with Han Gyeol's body, her erotic play involves many parts of the body and many senses. And I mean "play" here in the most powerful sense of the word, as in British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's elaborate theorizing of play as the transitional space between the self and the outside world, the space of childhood games and also childhood and adult creativity, the space of in-betweenness, delight, and danger.³⁸ There is a creative intimacy available to people who engage together in such a space—not an innocent intimacy because, as Winnicott would agree, this space has a way of taking the lid off behaviors and emotions. And in Eun Chan's case—and accessible to viewers who choose to identify with her—the transitional space of play is a very corporeal, very libidinal space.

In her email reply to me, director Lee Yun Jeong also reveals her deft incorporation of play into the production process:

I made many things during rehearsals. When we rehearsed the playful scenes that you mentioned, such as the fountain scene and the basketball scene, the three of us—Gong Yu who played Han Gyeol, Eun Hye who played Eun Chan, and I—played enough in the scenes. It wasn't like shooting scenes by reading learned lines, but we simply *played* within the scenes.³⁹

Early on, in episode 2 of the 17-episode run, we see Eun Chan playing with the wind and the speed of the car as she gleefully stands and waves and dances in Han Gyeol's convertible as it speeds across a bridge in Seoul. Combining masculine and feminine, childhood and adult motions, she unleashes physical joy. And it's so much fun to watch.

In episode 7, as things heat up between the main characters, there's a great scene where Eun Chan and Han Gyeol play together in an outdoor fountain. They are drunk. They're roughhousing in a bromance kind of way since at this point Han Gyeol still believes Eun Chan is a

man. But we viewers have never believed this, so we are open to enjoying the eroticism that she as a woman experiences. In fact, *Coffee Prince's* heterosexual ending, when everyone, including Han Gyeol, realizes she's a woman, has been discussed negatively as defeating the homosexuality-acceptance messages of the drama.⁴⁰ That may or may not hold water: I don't actually think that it defeats the earlier message, although it does make the whole drama perhaps unnecessarily safe—and this argument depends also whether the drama is being read in a Korean or U.S. context. In any case, what is interesting to me is how Eun Chan can be read throughout the drama, particular by female (mostly heterosexual) viewers who choose to identify with her. Importantly, Eun Chan can be read as performing an eroticism that is not dependent on procreation, marriage, or traditionally feminine appropriateness, and above all not dependent on the goal of coital penetration.

This is important because Eun Chan's eroticism is one rarely represented in U.S.-derived globally circulating mass media. And because it has a potential to affirm non-normative heterosexualities, a range of heterosexualities so many of us who self-define as women are living but ones that are not often articulated publicly in many Hollywood-template productions. After all, there's so much more to heterosexuality than coitus, and the roles available to exploring and enjoying that So-much-more can also connect to non-normative roles outside the sexual sphere as well. One option for a non-normative heterosexuality is one that is not goal-oriented (although it can include that goal if desired), one that involves the whole body and many senses in its range of pleasures, one that is polymorphous. If desired, it can include coitus but it needn't be dominated by that focus. In that nocturnal scene from episode 7 when the two are playing together in a fountain, we see Eun Chan enjoying alcohol, wetness, splashing, and Han Gyeol's body in goalless erotic play.

Such play carries over into the domestic space of Han Gyeol's apartment; here he carries and twirls Eun Chan around, and their laughing is also libidinal. And it is included via playful foreplay in his later heterosexual coitus fantasy (his bedroom one in episode 15) and their coitus actuality (her seduction of him in episode 16). This

continuum of polymorphous sexuality into, but not at all limited to, heterosexual coitus, is also appealing for a U.S. viewer, in this case me, from a culture where sexuality is squeezed—one might even say “marketed” in the hyper-capitalist U.S. context—too often into stern categories. Outside academia, the art world, and other subcultures in the U.S., worlds where the word “queer” is popular, women in daily life are commonly considered either heterosexual or lesbian, and if hetero, then categorized either as “normal” or, if non-normative, then into specific kinds of kinkiness, as for example a dominatrix with a whip. In short, U.S. public displays of sexuality tend to be strictly divided into categories. These categories are commonly divided into subcategories. And this categorical organization can be restrictive. In contrast, there can be so much more to sexuality, so much potential in the wonderful blurring of play and categories, including for those who self-define as heterosexual. In other words, it need not be a matter of simply being categorical or discarding categories. Movement among categories, or for those within a given category, say, heterosexuals, can be erotic. And a polymorphous pleasure in its nonrestrictive quality tends to suggest such movement.

In *Coffee Prince*, the viewer sees Eun Chan always as feminine to a degree; in fact, the viewer is led to think about her particular kind of femininity very often. The viewer also sees Eun Chan as, well, not as a lesbian, but as still “different” from traditional hetero-feminine. Eun Chan’s “new” femininity is overdetermined, and we engaged female viewers can even anguish with her over her functionally androgynous femininity and whether or not she’ll ever be able to deploy it in a heterosexual romance. At the same time, she’s seen as heterosexual simply because her desires are explicitly heterosexual (early on, for instance, we see her getting turned on by a glimpse of Han Gyeol’s nearly naked legs). So she’s a feminine-inflected, androgynous, and heterosexual tomboy, and so for a U.S. heterosexual female viewer, subject to heavy categorization and subcategorization, to use the imaginary of Eun Chan is to walk away from these rigidly restrictive categories right into the arms of joyous, creative, polymorphous heterosexuality.

Appealingly, even apart from her erotic play with Han Gyeol, Eun Chan is marked as a character who does not let corporeal repression stand in the way of her pleasures or her anger. Throughout the drama, we see an astounding number of images of Eun Chan eating as much as she feels like, not only in a masculine way, but in a way considered excessive even for most men. She loves to eat and she eats a lot. And she regularly becomes irritated or even angry regularly too, whether blowing at her bangs in annoyance or yelling or strong-arming some guy into apologizing to her. The corporeal comfort with androgyny, Lee Yun Jeong explains, was intrinsic to the actress's process. Interestingly, Yun Eun Hye performed at times in her brother's clothes:

[A]lso that she was wearing her brother's clothes gave her freedom. Though she did practice to walk like a man and make a male voice in the beginning of the filming, she eventually settled down comfortably to be like "a woman who looks like a boyish man"—just like Eun Chan. I think Gong Yu, too, saw Eun Hye playing Eun Chan not as an actress but as a cute, playful dongseng ["younger sibling" or a younger close friend]. And this seemed to further strengthen Eun Hye.⁴¹

At the end, when she comes back from Italy (where she went to study to further her barista specialist training), Eun Chan is shown enjoying her own particular negotiation with some feminine traditions, perming her hair, adding a touch of make up, while retaining her androgyny. In fact, one U.S. viewer remembers liking *Coffee Prince* in part because Eun Chan didn't have "a huge makeover to become a girly girl in the end. She became more feminine (looking), but not extremely so."⁴² So there's room in this drama, it seems, for negotiation with different types of femininity.

It's no accident that Eun Chan achieves this, her finally comfortable negotiation, when she leaves her home culture and spends some time for educational and career reasons in a truly foreign one halfway around the world. In Korea, this leaving has particular associations in terms of the importance of continuing education beyond high school, and other

culturally specific connotations to do with some Koreans who go abroad to do so.⁴³ But a U.S.-born viewer may or may not know those associations—and this is where a critical generosity about misreading is helpful. As one U.S. viewer, what I noticed is that Eun Chan is showing a striking amount of independence and a partial resistance *right* when a Cinderella fairy tale ending appears to be in her grasp. Mainly Eun Chan's going to Italy is portrayed as exciting, even if challenging.

The fact that Eun Chan enjoys Italy and learns there even as she misses people in Korea also underlines a kind of permission for the U.S. viewer in turn to learn from this *Coffee Prince* fantasy about Korea. Of course, I did not learn a lot about lived experience in Korea from *Coffee Prince*; I learned instead about a Korean-based fantasy cooked up by Program Director Lee Yun Jeong, writer Lee Jeong Ah, production company MBC, and the actors. But as a fan, I could learn by misreading that fantasy as if it were really (although I know better) a slice of Korean life. Perhaps as a foreigner it's easier to add a dollop of suspended disbelief when viewing to dream to oneself that somewhere in Seoul lives like these are being led. As Nava has argued, for women in western societies, there can be useful liberatory functions through such dreams and related hopes to feeling cosmopolitan in one's own home—in one's own life (and not necessarily with a plane ticket in hand). As it happens, with or without that suspended disbelief, the *Coffee Prince* fantasy is a wonderfully androgynous one that can open all sorts of doors for the pop-cosmopolitan viewer's own fantasies and hopes. Here for example, I've articulated my own fan fantasy about a feminine-accented androgyny mixed with a joyously polymorphous heterosexuality. Thus watching the tomboy as she falls in love, lust, and intimacy activates fantasies for me about my own eroticism and emotions—and framing these in broad, sensual ways in relation to public displays and private romps. It encourages me to imagine or remember less categorized ways than are in common everyday circulation in the U.S. to enact my sexuality and my femininity. And my own polymorphous pleasures. So *Coffee Prince* and other related entertainments can function for me to undergird my cosmopolitanism "at home," itself a practice of hope and of release from rigid categorizations of gender and sexuality. This can

be true for those who inhabit seemingly majoritarian sexual categories as well as those who identify with minoritarian ones. So, for some U.S. women like me, who “look” heterosexual, that is, are read as hetero, and in fact are heterosexual, a release from rigid legibility that in turn suggests rigid behavioral scripts is desired. In many ways, it doesn’t matter to me if these mainstream Korean drama-inspired fantasies are misreadings of daily life in Seoul. In the case of *Coffee Prince* it represents and celebrates a feminine-inflected polymorphous, desiring heterosexuality. There is a particular kind of sanctioning in its mainstream production and narrative qualities. *Coffee Prince* is entertaining and romantic. In suggesting imaginaries of hetero-sexualities plural, it is also so much more.

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Notes

¹ Shu-mei Shih, “Comparison as Relation,” in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Friedman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

² Daya Kishan Thussu, "Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-flow," in *Media on the Move: Global flow and contra-flow*, ed. Daya Kshan Thussu (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11-32.

³ Hanne Blank. *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston: Beacon, 2012).

⁴ Interviews, in person and via email, were obtained using the snowballing method through friend networks and also circles at the art school where I teach and at Bowling Green State University where I lectured. Interviews or interview contact information were also obtained at pan-Asian-American locales also frequented by Anglo Americans and African Americans in Chicago including nail salons and restaurants. Not counting casual conversations, I did 8 in-person interviews with follow up emails and, through email questions and responses exclusively, 19—for a total of 27.

⁵ Arirang TV is produced by the nonprofit Korea International Broadcasting Foundation, and since 2001 the satellite TV Dish Network has transmitted it in the U.S.

⁶ hotshotlover30, "Top 7 K-Dramas Chosen by Overseas Fans," *Soompi.com*, March 12, 2012, accessed August 31, 2013, <http://www.soompi.com/2012/03/12/top-7-kdramas-chosen-by-overseas-fans/>.

⁷ These tomboy productions, in their gender bending plots, commonly refer to many Korean viewers' familiarity with a range of manhwa, manga, and fan fiction gender-play traditions. Most of these do not overtly promote gay rights or even necessarily homoeroticism, although certainly some episodes of *Coffee Prince* raise both social acceptance of gays and homoeroticism as issues. In terms of what is permissible—and seen as potentially profitable—in mainstream commercial Korean media, it is worth noting that the year before *Coffee Prince* was broadcast marked the stunning commercial success of the internationally acclaimed and nationally popular movie *The King and the Clown*, released at the end of 2005 and a box office hit in 2006. This Korean period-drama movie represented the homoerotic relationships between two male clowns (jesters) and a mad king's attraction for one of them (Shin 2013). Although homosexuality is not, outside of the military, against the law in Korea, neither is acceptance the rule. Military service is required for men in South Korea, and the Military Penal Code outlaws sexual behavior between men.

⁸ An accountant, email message to author, June 20, 2012.

⁹ Lorna Fitz Simmons and John Lent, eds., *Asian Popular Culture in Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Youna Kim, ed., *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Do Kyun Kim and Min-sun Kim, eds., *Hallyu: Influence of Korean Popular Culture in Asia and Beyond* (Seoul: Seoul National

University Press, 2011); Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Fan-subbed sites are web sites where dramas are available, usually for free, to viewers, and where fans volunteer to translate and subtitle them. On Viki.com as of this writing in September 2013, the English subtitles of a popular Korean drama are usually accomplished within 24 hours of the drama's original airing in Korea.

¹¹ S. Jung, "K-Pop Beyond Asia: Performing Trans-Nationality, Trans-Sexuality, and Trans-Textuality," in *Asian Popular Culture in Transition*, ed. Lorna Fitzsimmons and John Lent (New York: Routledge, 2013), 113, 119.

¹² A graduate student in education, email to author, May 2012.

¹³ Interview with a 24-year-old beautician in Chicago, March 2012.

¹⁴ May 24, 2011, accessed July 29, 2012. Based on language and syntax, I estimate that Kim A. is probably American and/or lives in the U.S.

¹⁵ Choe Sang-hun and Mark Russel, "Bringing K-Pop to the West," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2012, accessed July 9, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/business/global/using-social-media-to-bring-KPop-to-the-West>.

¹⁶ Chua Beng Huat, *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 30.

¹⁷ Bernhard Seliger, "The Opening of Popular Cultural Markets of South Korea Under Economic Nationalism and International Pressure" in *Asian Popular Culture in Transition*, ed. Lorna Fitzsimmons and John Lent (New York: Routledge), 38-56.

¹⁸ Henry Jenkins, "Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence," *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Explaining Participatory Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 152.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154-155

²⁰ Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 14.

²¹ James Turnbull, "Korean Women's Sexual Histories: still a slippery subject," June 30, 2014, accessed June 30, 2014, <http://thegrandnarrative.com/2014/06/30/korea-virginity-contraception-condom-use/>.

²² Anonymous, email to author, June 10, 2014.

²³ Anonymous, email to author, June 19, 2014.

²⁴ The ratio of female to male full-time workers' wages in Korea is 61 percent, reported *Business Korea* in June 10, 2014 article, "Gender Wage Gap: Korea Shows Largest Wage Gap Between Male and Female Workers in OECD," <http://www.businesskorea.co.kr/article/4982/gender-wage-gap-korea-shows-largest-wage-gap-between-male-and-female-workers-oecd>.

²⁵ “Korean TV Drama,” *VisitKorea*, accessed November 7, 2011, http://visitkorea.or.kr/enu/CU/CU_EN_8_5_1_26.jsp.

²⁶ Lee Yun Jeong, email to author, August 3, 2014.

²⁷ Anonymous, email to author, June 26, 2014.

²⁸ D. Harris, Comment on Hulu.com/coffee-prince, February 4, 2011, accessed July 29, 2012.

²⁹ Anonymous, email to author, June 10, 2014.

³⁰ Jo Eun Young, “*Coffee Prince* Writer Interview 1,” *Newsen*, August 24, 2007, accessed July 24, 2014, http://www.newsen.com/news_view.php?uid=200708240859541001&search=title&searchstring=%C0%CC%C1%A4%BE%C6%20%C0%DB%B0%A1.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lee Yun Jeong, email to author, August 3, 2014.

³³ Jo, “*Coffee Prince* Writer Interview 1.”

³⁴ This is not to say that U.S. heterosexual baby boomers (who, in terms of western sexual history, came of age after the invention of the birth control pill and before the spread of HIV), myself included, only perform heterosexuality through intercourse—or that we don’t enjoy intercourse. I do. But generationally I’d say that there has been and continues to be great emphasis on coitus for baby boomers for those historical reasons mentioned above, with perhaps less public-arena attention to other options. (In contrast, sex toys, for instance, have been more discussed at least in the media by other U.S. cohorts; see for example, the publication *Bust*.) Specific, comprehensive demographic statistics for U.S. viewers of Korean dramas broken down by age as well as gender do not, as far as I’ve been able to determine, yet exist. Anecdotally I’d say a similar age spread exists for American female viewers as is commonly assumed for Korean female viewers. And this is supported by a press release from the Korean YA Entertainment posted August 8, 2013, on PRnewswire.com (<http://prnewswire.com/news-releases/korean-tv-dramas-surprisingly-embraced-by-us-audiences-56045202.html>), saying that in the U.S. Korean dramas are popular with baby boomers as well as younger viewers. And individual web sites do some demographic breakdowns of users, for example, on dramafever.com, aimed at a U.S. and in general international audience, over 75% percent of the audience is female. See Xiaochang Li, “*Dramafever.com* full interview (part 2/5),” [Canarytrap.net](http://canarytrap.net), April 8, 2009, <http://canarytrap.net/2009/04/dramafevercom-full-interview-part-2/>.

³⁵ “Polymorphous Perversity,” accessed December 9, 2011, <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/English/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/polymorphous.html>. 2011.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the History of Sexuality*, trans. James Beaumont Strachey (1905; repr., New York: Basic Books, 1962).

³⁷ Vatican, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World," July 31, 2004, accessed October 10, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.

³⁸ Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971; repr., New York: Routledge, 2005).

³⁹ Lee, email to author.

⁴⁰ "K-dramas and 'Pseudo-Homosexuality': What Gives?" *seoulbeats*, September 3, 2012, accessed October 10, 2013, <https://Seoulbeats.com/2012/09/k-dramas-and-pseudo-homosexuality-what-gives/>. 2012.

⁴¹ Lee, email to author.

⁴² A 25-year-old graduate student in education, email to author, May 2012.

⁴³ Youna Kim, *Diasporic Daughters: Transnational Migration, Media and the Identity of Asian Women* (New York: Routledge, 2011).