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Victoria L. Johnson

Black Seoul

Her curly brown hair must have been like a sunflower amongst a sea of roses when her classmates pulled it and called her "boo boo girl." But that's almost to be expected when someone different is navigating the ruthless world of kindergarten. Except that was the day five-year-old Egypt Yuna Collier had enough of the taunts from her South Korean classmates.

"When I had Egypt I never let her be soft" said Egypt's African-American father, Schetrone Collier, a soldier in the Army who's stationed in South Korea. "The teacher explained that the boys in her class had been pulling her hair because it was different. Egypt beat them up and went back to playing."

But Egypt, whose mother is Korean, is not in the first wave of Black-Korean children to grow up in South Korea. It's estimated that three thousand marriages spurred out of the Korean War leaving thousands of biracial children when the GI men went home without their bride.

According to a 1955 issue of Jet Magazine, there were at least 200 'Blasian' kids left after the Korean War – and South Korea still has the largest Afro-Asian population in the Far East.

Egypt is, however, among the recent boom of multi-ethnic babies in South Korea.

According to Beyond Hallyu, a news site on Korean culture, it's estimated that by 2020, half of the children in rural Korea will come from multi-ethnic households for a total of 1.6 million multi-ethnic people.

Although Egypt has had to navigate her way through school bullies, she is readily accepted as a face of print advertisements, commercials, and music videos. Most recently she starred in the music video "Without You" by Korean pop artist Lee Michelle, the third Black-Korean singer to debut in K-pop.

But unlike Egypt, Lee, 22, grew up without the arms of her father to run into after other students bullied her. Until this day, Lee has never met her father.

Both still face racism but they have also gained thousands of adoring Black fans around the globe. But the Black fans aren't just following Lee Michelle and Egypt, they are self-proclaimed K-pop and K-drama addicts.

Hallyu, translated to The Korean Wave, is a cultural phenomenon that's been happening since the 1990s with the increasing popularity of South Korean culture around the world. The bubble burst with the K-pop phenomenon "Gangnam Style" by Psy, but the wave has been steadily coming for years and is still continuing with an increasing amount of K-pop bands performing worldwide every year.

According to DramaFever, a popular streaming site to watch Korean dramas with English subtitles, 85% of its audience is non-Asian with 45% being Black or Latino, 40% being Caucasian and 15% Asian.

“Korean dramas are taking over parts of American culture rapidly. It’s mainly due to the fresh romantic concepts and plot lines thrown into these dramas,” said Michael Smith-Grant, a popular vlogger who records a series of “reaction videos” to K-pop videos – one titled “Black People React To K-pop.”

Like others, Smith-Grant became engulfed in the culture around 2009, when popular Korean dramas, *Boys Over Flowers* and *You’re Beautiful* aired.

“I was soon absorbed more into the culture and became a bigger fan than I ever was,” said Smith-Grant, 24, who under the name MisterPopoTV has over 50,000 subscribers on YouTube.

Other Black K-poppers and Korean drama addicts like Smith-Grant have taken their fandom to the next level as well and are winning at it.

Born from two Haitian immigrants, Arnelle ‘Elly’ Nonon, 20, says she feels like she’s been singing her whole life but her earliest memory stems from being seven-years-old in her church choir in Staten Island. It wasn’t until early in her high school days that Nonon first listened to K-pop through a suggestion of a friend via AOL Instant Messenger.

“I have always been really into girl power and so I’m watching “Gee” [by K-pop girl group, Girls Generation] and I’m like this is the most amazing thing I have ever seen. They are nine like gorgeous girls and they are all dressed all like cute,” said Nonon.

Needless to say, Nonon liked it, but she didn’t quite love it yet. She still wasn’t hooked. Nonon continued listening to American pop music until she found herself scouring for something new.

“I don’t know how it happened I have always been a YouTube junkie and sometimes you find yourself on the weird side of YouTube. K-pop was that weird side of YouTube and I fell into YG [Entertainment] and I was like ‘Yo! K pop crew goes mad hard like how could I ever like fall off of this?’”

Nonon started covering K-pop songs on YouTube and eventually gained the attention and compliments of K-pop star, Yong Guk. It wasn’t long afterwards that Nonon, who also made it to Hollywood stage in American Idol Season 10, decided to use her singing talents to become a K-pop star herself.

“I think that was the turning point of when I would say, I’m really interested in this music, what if I pursue this?” said Nonon. “I have always wanted to be an entertainer and I love performing and I love the aspect of dramatics and I feel like K-pop has that and it just shows through,” said Nonon.

It was at the same time South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was hosting contests around the world for global citizens to compete on stage in front of thousands of people in Changwon, South Korea for the annual World K-pop Festival.

And Nonon was chosen from hundreds of competitors to represent the United States.

Nonon often spends hours listening to songs – on the ferry, on the bus, at home – to get the syllables and pronunciation exactly right of the words she's just starting to learn. It takes days of “living and breathing” the song, before she's comfortable enough with it to perform.

“You have to do it right like when you relate it back to your own culture as a person of color and you think about how you've been disrespected. You have to think about other people too,” said Nonon.

For Nonon's performance debut in South Korea, her choice was the sultry and powerful song “1, 2, 3, 4” by Lee Hi, about a girl breaking up with her boyfriend and telling him to go away. Think: Aretha Franklin's R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

But no K-pop performance is right without a sparkly outfit that makes a statement. And for Nonon that was a \$700 Sherry Hill multi-colored sequined and peacock-feathered dress.

“I was trying to raise my own money for it because who is going to ask their mother for like a crazy amount of money for a dress that you are going to wear like once, so it was hard. I didn’t want to ask her, she is really hardworking, so I was trying to make my own money,” said Nonon.

But what mother can resist investing in a child’s dream?

“My mom is supportive in that even if she doesn’t understand exactly why I am doing K-pop or whatever, she doesn’t question it, and she’ll help me anyway that she can. She is like, ‘I know this is really important to you, I know what you are feeling, I know how much you want this dress, I know how hard you are trying to go. I’m going to give you this much for it.’”

The dress was like her wedding dress – before her actual wedding dress – according to Nonon.

And now she was ready.

In August 2013, she flew fourteen hours to South Korea and landed in the country for the first time. For eight days she met with contestants from around the world including the countries: China, Japan, Russia and Nigeria. And on the seventh day there, it was time for the show.

She walked on stage with her Sherry Hill dress, geared with a song she's been preparing for months; ready to sing a song in a language she doesn't know to a sea of South Korean K-pop fans.

“It was like everything that happened was dream-like. The day of the show I felt like I was like walking on air,” said Nonon. “I was thinking this is the most amazing experience in my life. I have met all these amazing people and there is nothing left for me to do except have fun. So I got on that stage and I just had fun.”

The feeling continued throughout her performance and afterwards – even until they started announcing the winners. And while lost in euphoria, Nonon nearly missed her name being called as the grand prizewinner of the K-pop World Festival – and also their first Black winner.

The following year, another black duo would represent the United States. Together the fiery redheaded Shervonne Brown and the cool-blue tressed Todd Wheeler, form the group Double The Fire. Although they didn't win, they both agree that Nonon inspired them.

“We love Elly,” said Wheeler. “The K-pop community is very supportive and close,” followed Brown.

And whether or not they know, Nonon, MisterPopo, Double The Fire and all other Black K-poppers are always acting as ambassadors for Black people in South Korea.

While Black people are slowly being included in K-pop entertainment, there are still instances of stereotyping and ignorance in K-pop.

The most blatant was in the early 2000s when the Bubble Sisters debuted – in blackface.

Others are subtler – like in the 2014 music video for “La Song” by the popular South Korean artist and actor Rain (Ninja Assassin, Return To Base).

In the music video, Rain strolls towards a black woman, leans in close to her ear as if to whisper a secret and the woman’s silhouette is seen grow three times her size around her breasts and backside.

Immediately, some K-pop fans thought of the constant over-sexualization of Black women and of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman whose butt, breast and labia were put on display from 1810 to after her death in 1974.

Others noticed the other six Black men and women in the video – more conservatively dressed – and found little wrongdoing in the music video.

Another criticism of “La Song” was of the West African dancer, Ma Abena, who some Black K-pop fans said her face paint was too “tribal.”

“She dances unlike the other extras in the video, and her image and motions does little other than to satisfy some desire to portray usual stereotypes about African tribes as a “savage” other,” reads an article on Seoulbeats, a site on K-pop.

But Abena quickly dispelled these accusations.

“Yes, my face was painted white in the video; however, all participants had paint on their faces. My paint stood out the most because I was featured in the video. While I was on set, the atmosphere was very loving, positive and encouraging. Although it was cold on the set due to the winter day, myself and the other talent were treated well,” reads a statement on Abena’s website.

There have been some Black dancers in South Korean videos without as much controversy as well.

Mauika Hicks, 29, was the first Black woman to appear as a main lead in a K-pop music video, “Know Your Name” by K-pop artist Jay Park. Hicks has been dancing for 15 years and knew the choreographers of the music video – but she had no idea how big K-pop was when she agreed to appear in the video – nor did she know she would be making history.

“They [the choreographers] literally called me up one day and were like ‘Can you fly to Korea tomorrow? I was like I think I can. Then the next thing I know I was on a plane to Korea for the video,” said Hicks.

And four years later, she is still overwhelmed by the experience.

“I can still think about it and it’s crazy to me because it really is a part of history but I still don’t even know how to take it. I really didn’t realize how big it was going to be when I got there. Like for me it was a job. I went in and I did the video. I didn’t realize until after it came out that it has never been done before. I didn’t realize that there has never been an African American woman as a lead in a K-pop video,” said Hicks.

Although Hicks admits to listen to very little K-pop – she does enjoy Jay Park’s music.

Representation can be very important – especially when the majority of South Koreans haven’t seen a Black person outside of what’s on their television. But slowly people like Egypt, Lee Michelle, Arnelle “Elly” Nonon and numerous Black vloggers are bridging the gap between the known and the unknown while dispelling stereotypes.

The younger generations are better as well. The dynamic duo, Dom, who is Black and Hyo, who is Korean, for one, team up to make info graphics to teach people Hangul – the written form of Korean.

And the once taunted schoolgirl, Egypt has been featured in over 100 media outlets – and will even be featured in a movie directed by Ghanaian Sam Okyere. And Okyere himself has been featured in Vogue Korea and Korea Herald as a pioneering ambassador for Black people in South Korea.

And if similar interests are the number one reason different cultures come together – it'll be no time before South Korean culture enthusiasts fully unite.