Department of Gender Studies

Bachelor's Thesis

Signifying Gay Men

in Korean TV Drama Fiction:

Naturalizing the Normative in the Contrast of the Imagined Other

Kristoffer Tingbacke

Supervisor: Sara Goodman

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Abstract

This essay investigates, using semiotic deconstruction, how Korean TV fiction dramas signify gay men in the contrasting of a designated 'normal' that effectively communicates heteronormativity as "myth" obscuring other 'alternative' ways of life. This heteronormativity is neither universal nor eternal but is rather part of the situated collective imaginings of Korean communities and people. The conceptualizations of global cultural flows show the intense dissemination of culture that hybridizes not only notions of a national community, but also worlds and people. This study explores the 'familiar' yet hybridized meanings of gay identity manifested in a selection of Korean dramas made possibly by disjunctive and multidirectional flows (of media, people, ideas, intimacies and more). While it shows the often marginalized constructions of gay men, it still shows a progressive push of diversifying representation of gay life, gradually claiming and inventing space not only on the margins but working their way toward the core: steadily undermining a heteronormative naturalized order.

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1. Introduction

"There are no gay men in Korea"

There is seemingly consensus around the idea that there are "no" gay men in South Korea (Mogashoa, 2011). That very notion had even reached me through the various encounters with South Korean popular culture and people, both in Sweden and in South Korea. I would, and still do, react with bafflement at the idea. It is nonetheless necessary to consider that in some way, gay men cannot exist or rather that their existence is conditional and marginalized. If that is the case, then where are they? I turn to Korean media productions that have been a part in, predominantly so, my own imagining of Korean *communities*, *worlds* and *people*. Whether we like it or not, TV fiction influence and affect us greatly – especially when many shows take it upon themselves to inform the public about "hot issues". In these imaginings they may naturalize certain hegemonic collectives' existence and ways of being, largely in the contrast of distinguished 'others'. While it is naturally so, that media cannot truly and wholeheartedly account for and represent society as it "is", viewers still become engaged through their consumption of media with representations that circulate in contemporary culture.

Thus, in this essay I investigate Korean TV dramas as practice of *imagining* that communicate naturalizing/denaturalizing meanings about gender and sexuality in order to understand how subjects become intelligible only within ideologically demarcated imaginings that ricochet into the world of the 'real'. In my research overview I present an assortment of contributions to intersecting fields of Korean, Asian, queer, media studies that inform my understanding of global cultural processes' effects on media discourse and ultimately sites of imagination. From that point, inspired by the Judith Butler's (1990) queer theorizations within her famous work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, I discuss theories of globalization. Arjun Appadurai(1996) and his extension of Ben Anderson's (1983, 2006) imagined community to *worlds* and imagination as social practice, show the vast nature of global flows in the form of queer flows, flows of intimacies, masculinities and more. In my analysis I employ semiotic deconstruction to detect how signs operate to establish naturalizing meanings of heteronormativity in the three Korean dramas that constitute my material. Out of these fictions, I have made a selection of imagery from specific scenes that demonstrate the signifying of the gay male characters, and that also are able to showcase the effects of global

flows. In the concluding discussion I summarize my findings in relation to my research questions and reconnect to earlier research, theoretical base and methodology.

1.1.1 Situating Myself & My Research

Having been smitten by the phenomenon that is *Hallyu* or 'Korean wave' (See Jung 2011 and Kim, 2013) through the indulging of Korean TV and overall popular culture products I have gradually developed a fascination and passion for the ideas of what Korea, its people and their lives *may* be, the practice of imagining highlights the essence of this passion. This passion stems from the distinct impact of affect I have experienced in the '*consumption*' of Korean imagined communities, worlds and people as manifested in Korean TV dramas and the effect of 'affect', cannot be overstated (hereafter, I refer to them as Korean dramas). The extent of this fascination shows in my own consumption: I have actively attempted to incorporate a 'Korean' way of expression into my overall style, as to make it a defining element of my individual identity (See Chua Beng Huat in Jung 2011, p. 21). The cultivation of such a style constitutes in this sense a linkage between the individual to a type of envisaged 'Korean life'. To establish an even greater sense of proximity to the object of my passion, I registered on an international 'penpal' website. Here I made contact with several Korean people, many of whom are my friends today, forming a community with 'no sense of place'. Among these people were Daehan, confined to the compartmentalized gay spatial- and temporal existence in his offline-reality, this website and the internet as a whole, provided a set of spaces that enabled him of being "out". I met Daehan when I travelled to Korea, Seoul, for the first time in 2013. He showed me around town, eagerly wanting to make the most of my time in Korea. Daehan grew increasingly anxious knowing that I wouldn't be staying for very long and the possibility of being "out" in front of someone from a-far-away place provided temporary but much needed relief. It is not until now however, that I find myself asking what it means to *be* gay in a time, where globalized notions of liberal individualism clash with responsibilities and expectations of proscribed gender roles in regards to duties pertaining to family and nation. What does it mean to be 'in', is there ever an 'out', and if so, what are the consequences of being 'out' in Korea? I was inspired by Elise Fylling's (2012) master's thesis where she explores the factors involved in rendering *lesbians* invisible in Korea and Japan to the point where I asked myself, what of Sweden? To what extent are LGBT people still repudiated in heteronormative Sweden?

This paves the way for a postcolonial critique into the Western hegemony on knowledge production that I myself impose as I enquire about Korean gay men's *conditioned existence*. Since my admittance to the Department of Gender Studies at Lund University I have had ample time to familiarize myself with the field of gender studies, albeit largely from a west centric or Eurocentric perspective. The knowledge I have access to and produce is unavoidably filtered through my Swedish, white, heterosexual cis-gender male, middle-classed *vision*, my knowledge as well as any knowledge is situated (Donna Haraway, 1988). Furthermore, the venture for an ultimate truth is a fruitless one. We must see that knowledge is derived and produced from myriad standpoints occupied by activists and scholars alike, and as we converge we can at best amount to formulating merely 'near'-objective truths. Furthermore, it is necessary to address that the observations I make out of these drama series, are completely and inevitably produced from my situatedness. Even as I try to establish what position the producers/writers of a drama's specific scenes want the viewers to assume, it is always *imagined* from my situated translocality. I want to extend the *imagining* as not only entailing the research focus or subject, but the very theories and methods that we lean on, imagination is a practice central to our lives. The *doing* of gender, femininities, masculinities, the *doing* of intimacies, who? Where? On what terms and conditions are people able to engage in various *doings?* Our situated imagining is part of wider schemes of imagination, where some imaginings are deemed natural and legitimate however not without contestation.

1.1.2 Challenging Hollywood: 'Hallyuwood'

Korean popular culture has grown exponentially in the past decade(s) and this phenomenon is referred to as '*Hallyu' or* the '*Korean wave*' in and around Korea while another cultural phenomenon takes place in the 'West' in reverence of Korean genre film (See Kim, 2013, Jung 2011). Even as its popularity is largely concentrated among bordering Asian markets, its appeal gradually grows and reaches markets as far as North America, Europe and the Middle East and more. With dedicated online communities such as soompi.com (with subscribers in the millions, See Kim, 2013, p. 2) uploading dramas and creating subtitles in various languages to help other fans, further sharing on Facebook or Youtube, the spread and expansion of Korean media is even challenging Hollywood to which there is talk of a 'Hallyuwood' (Yecies, Gyung-Shim, 2011) and "Hollywood of the East" (Kim, 2013, p. 6). This global exposure of 'Koreanness' is interesting because of the challenge it poses to an already existing global cultural hegemony. In the same way that scholars have talked about

'Americanization' as a global cultural force, we may even begin, or should have to consider 'Koreanization' that influences our situated imaginings and overall social practices.

1.2 Purpose & Research questions

The purpose of my essay is to explore the signifying of gay male characters in Korean dramas – treating these fictions as hegemonic imaginings of Korean communities. Furthermore I seek to explore the effects of *global cultural flows* in hybridizing notions of Korean communities and subjects. I will analyse specific scenes selected from three Korean dramas using semiotic analysis to explain how the different levels of signs (denotative, connotative, mythic) communicate naturalizing meanings of a specific imagined order (heteronormative) maintained and sustained by the imagining of 'deviants'. To lead me through my analysis I pose the following questions:

- How do signs (denote, connote, and mythicize) operate to communicate naturalizing meanings of heteronormativity through the signifying of gay male characters?
- How do Korean dramas signify (denote, connote) these characters?
- How can we detect the effect of global multidirectional flows within Korean dramas as signifying practices of imagining communities, worlds or people?

1.3 Material - Korean Dramas

In this section I present the material of my analysis which is comprised of a selection of scenes from three Korean dramas. They all feature gay characters in some way, with varying degree of exposure. The titles of the TV fiction drama series are: *Life is Beautiful* (Dir. Eul Young Jung, 2010), *Secret Garden* (Dir. Kwon Hyuk-Chan, Woo-Cheol Shin 2010), and *You're All Surrounded* (Dir. Yu In-Sik, 2014). Love and/or romance themes are central elements to Korean drama series and quite clearly define the genre, and are almost strictly heteronormative. The limitations of this thesis' timeframe also make themselves noticed: I have had to make a selection of scenes that don't fully make sense in an analysis of a TV drama series. To make such a selection, the more comprehensive understanding is lost in the material that is excluded. Thus I have attempted to highlight the scenes and events therein that best help answer my questions. It is still fruitful to analyse as even a considerably small

sample of imagery contain many signs that communicate meanings – much like the classic proverb suggest: a picture is worth a thousand words.

Furthermore, I have come to rely on the translations by community members of the website ***www.gooddrama.net*** from Korean to English which causes a significant loss in the subtleties and specifics of those verbal-textual signs. Nonetheless, the conceptualization global cultural multidirectional-flows demonstrate the value in analysing these fictions: the intermingling of such flows emanating from different sites of cultural practice enable extensions of conceptual maps. Language is truly diverse and is communicated in not only spoken or written form. Meanings are also communicated in the form of the visual motions of objects and gestures of bodies as well as the aural in them and more. The website www.gooddrama.net has also been my source of access to these Korean dramas. It is a community based *streaming* website that simply lists all sorts of Asian fictions, ranging from Japanese anime, Chinese drama series, to Korean dramas and more. It doesn't actually host any files on its servers.

1.3.1 '*You're All Surrounded*' (2014)

This drama series that aired in 2014 can be labelled as a *Crime TV drama series* where the story is mainly focused on the development of the two main characters, more so the male protagonist. The drama is about the boy Kim Ji-Yong (later on, Eun Dae Gu) growing up and working toward becoming a detective so that he may discover the truth about his mother's murder. He's one among four other new recruits to the Gangnam police academy; these recruits are Eun Dae Gu, Eo Soo Sun, Park Tae-il and Ji Gook. The viewer follows their progress in becoming detectives while their background stories and relationships to one and other are further explored throughout the series runtime. While the focus of the series lie in the individual development of the lead character Eun Dae Gu, the romantic involvement with co-detective Eo Soo Sun is also central to the story. This TV drama is interesting and valuable for my analysis because of the signifying of Park Tae-il as 'gay' in the context- and role of a police detective.

1.3.2 '*Secret Garden'* (2010)

This is a "fated-love" themed Korean drama that aired in 2010 and ran from November to January 2011 for 20 episodes (came to occupy the same TV slot held by "Life is Beautiful") which saw a lot of success and received a lot of praise (The Chosunilbo, 2011).

The main story line revolves around the owner of a department store (Kim Jo Woon) and a stuntwoman (Gil Ra Im) that eventually develop feelings toward one and other. This will however not constitute the focus of my analysis of this TV drama, rather the relation between the characters 'Oska', a (Korean wave star), and Tae Sun an aspiring musician which Oska discovers. The development of 'Oska' centres on the pursuit of his past love 'Yoon Seul', as well as the pursuit of Tae Sun that he hopes to adopt as his trainee. I have selected this TV drama series for my analysis because of how it in one specific scene naturalizes heteronormativity in the signifying of difference.

1.3.3 'Life is Beautiful' (2010)

This Korean drama that aired between March and November 2010 and ran for 63 episodes is centred on the everyday life of a multigenerational family and their respective personal dilemmas that more or less concern the whole family. Written by Kim Soo Hyun, a renowned writer known for bringing social issues to light through her writing. This drama is arguably most known for its portrayal of an openly 'gay' couple which is why it is of interest to my analysis. Despite its surrounding controversy, the show enjoyed high ratings and was aired on Primetime network television (Korea Joongang Daily, 2010). This particular drama and the selections of scenes I have made show how it signifies gay life and subjects around the concept of *normality*, the '*closet*' and coming/being '*out*'.

1.4 Research overview

Here I present earlier research onto the fields of Korean media, Asian, queer and masculinity studies first introducing the state of queer media studies. As a regrettable consequence of my insufficient knowledge of the Korean language, a great deal of scholarly work and other sources are lost to me. I have nonetheless discovered a handful of illuminating works in regards to the overall topic of homosexuality in Korea.

1.4.1: Queer Asian (Korean) Media studies

A great deal of research in English, in regards to *queer* media studies is very much centred on 'Western – North American' media (Poole 2014, Joyrich 2014, Avila-Saavedra 2009) but also 'Non-American'-Western sites of media productions still in its

relation to US media (Kis, 2012). Research *in English* that explores constructions of gender and sexuality pertaining to media in East-Asia is limited (See Martin 2003) and this lack of scholarly interest in the 'Non-West' hasn't gone unnoticed. Audrie Yue (2014) in "*Queer Asian Cinema and Media Studies: From Hybridity to Critical Regionality*" in her account on the forming of the AsiaPacifiQueer network, explains that it arose as a collective challenge to the (North American) US-centric nature of queer studies placing American sexual cultures in the foreground with 'alternative' sites (non-American) as either particular or secondary. The development the field of queer Asian media and cinema studies enabled and developed new conceptualizations that have destabilized the US/Euro-centrism of queer studies with theoretical tools such as *queer hybridity*, *critical regionality* and *minor transnationalism.* Yue counts among the commonly employed methods in the field of Asian queer media: formalist film theory, discourse analysis and semiotic deconstruction that are further combined with cultural materialism of area and queer race studies. She describes it as being multidisciplinary: it draws upon psycho analysis, audience reception studies, affect studies, media sociology and more (Yue, 2014, p. 150). In which this work would fall under the category of semiotic deconstruction.

Among the few works that I have found exploring Korean media constructions of gender and sexuality is Sun Jung's (2011) *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*. In her book she explores the hybridized state of contemporary Korean popular culture shaped by global (trans) cultural flows, inspired by Judith Butler's (1990) conceptualization of gender as *performative*, but also Raewyn Connell's (1995, 2005) *doing* of masculinities. With the concept of a *hybrid South Korean masculinity* applied onto a series of empirical reception studies of viewers in Japan, Singapore and "the West", Jung demonstrates the contextually specific ways these viewers' ambivalent desires "embrace" these hybridized Korean masculinities which are comprised of global, soft and postmodern masculinities. Utilizing the term '*mugukjeok'* inspired by Koichi Iwabuchi's Japanese equivalent '*mukokuseki*', Jung suggests that the "culturally odorless" aspects of the 'products' is the key to understanding the success of Korean popular culture to traverse national borders and be globally consumed. According to Jung the concept suggests "transcultural hybridity", and in its "odorless" state, enables intermingling of the global cultural flows with the national, traditional and specific (Jung, 2011, p. 3). By exploring representations of famous Korean Wave stars' masculinities such as Bae Yong-Joon's soft masculinity or Rain's global masculinity, in relation to the reception of the various audiences, we can begin to grasp the

power of media in communicating ideal and normative gender expression and sexuality.

1.4.2 Overall Topic of Homosexuality in South Korea

Among them, Bong, Youngshik D. (2008) also attests to the subject of sexual minorities having been long considered a peripheral topic in his article *The Gay Rights Movement in Democratizing Korea*". He provides a brief overview of gay and lesbian activist groups' efforts to counter sensationalist portrayals or accounts of homosexuality in mass media through various targeted campaigns (mass media, schools and churches). Choo Hae Yeon (2007) in *"Undoing Gender/Sexuality: Framing Teenage Homosexuality in South Korean Print Media 1990-2005"* has analyzed Korean newspapers' discussions surrounding teenage homosexuality. She shows how global discourses (human rights/the Christian Right) deeply influenced debates concerning teenage homosexuality, but were still only employed to the degree of local actors' overarching intentions and target audiences. Choo problematizes the means of gay and lesbian activist's strategic use of human rights discourse that while achieving recognition with the National Human Rights Commission, functioned to de-gender homosexual teenagers within that frame, as well as overall media discourse have been emphasizing the suffering of teenage homosexuals in specifically gendered ways: boys as driven by hyper-masculine urges while downplaying the homoerotic pleasures of teenage *iban* girls (lesbian). The overall emphasis on the *suffering* rather than the *pleasures and desires*, and the specific gendered constructions of homosexuals is easily recognized in my analysis of the Korean dramas, albeit in different ways. The findings of Choo show the implications of constructions and representations emphasizing the *negative*, framing homosexual life as only fraught with peril, resulting in specific imaginings that may in the long run function to naturalize heteronormative societal order.

Research into the lived experiences of gay men such as John Song Pae Cho's (2012) *Faceless things: South Korean Gay Men, Internet, And Sexual Citizenship* writes that with the rise and spread of internet access, possibilities for gay men in their 30s or 40s to live out their sexual desires have become all the more available. This has brought with it a chance of exercising sexual freedom as well as discovering new spaces of *being* gay in imagined 'closeted' and 'out' spatial- and temporal situated identities, simultaneously challenging and altering the notion of the closet that has defined 'Western gay culture'. However Cho concludes that a new culture has formed around the retirement and retreat of these men: rather

than forming new gay subjective identities and collectivities, the heterosexual nuclear family becomes prioritized to enable gay social relations. These closeted practices that Cho refers to do not outright signify a rejection of homosexuality into Korean life, rather show an incorporation of it. Even the nation of Korea, he argues, can be understood as a "national closet", as Korean gay men engage in 'gay tourism' venturing into neighbouring countries to be gay. Cho's comprehensive ethnographic study shows the complexities in Korean gay men's lives where heteronormative familism prescribes their duties to family and nation while also notions of liberal individualism would encourage self-development. The continued internalization- and fulfilment of these duties and 'closeted' gay life naturalize the imagined Korean community as wholly heteronormative, with its core unit constituting the heterosexual nuclear family. This is exemplified in my analysis of the Korean drama *Life is Beautiful.*

1.5 Theorizing imagination as social practice

In this section I present my theoretical framework which is inspired by Anderson's (1983, 2006) Imagined communities, Appadurai's (1996) Disjunctive globalization, global flows (as multidirectional rather than uni/bi-directional), *imagination as social practice*, and globalization as hybridization rather than ideological homogenizing force. Within these lie notions of gender, sexuality, masculinity (Connell, 2005), intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003) and also systems of language (Hall, Evans, Nixon, (red.) 2013, Barker, 2002). These concepts and theories, in their unison, help to more accurately capture the extents of media functioning as a practice of imagination. The various spatial and temporal imagined localities also house specifically *intelligible* subjects – these subjects become filtered into the imagined context as to correlate with normative ideas of masculinities, sexualities and expected intimacies.

1.5.1 Theorizing media as a practice of signification/imagination

The theorization of *the imagined community*, as developed by Benedict Anderson (1983, 2006), provides a very helpful framework for understanding representations in media. The production and performance of Korean dramas may be understood as

manifestations of imagined Korean communities, worlds and subjects therein. The maintenance of the idea of such imaginings is dependent on the naturalizing of an imagined homogeneous people contrasted by 'othered' bodies. This process of othering, maintains the idea of gay bodies as being foreign/different, and what repudiates gay men from being a part of the normative collective. This can provide some sort of entry and insight into the representations and space that is given to gay men in media and discourse overall. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) explains this process in her book *Gender & Nation*, within the concept of nation-state(s) lie an assumed correspondence between the boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of people within a certain state. Despite the reality of many nation-states and people as heterogeneous communities irrespective of nations and states, the *fiction* or the *imagined community*, creates and naturalizes a hegemonic collectivity within a nation and its access to the ideological apparatus of society, be it state or civil (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 11). Using the word *fiction*, we can think again of the function of media as a tool of manifesting ideology. The ways that we then create stories, we draw upon our conceptual maps, we *imagine* subjects and spaces that they inhabit, are inescapably shaped through ideologies, such as heteronormative 'familism'. Appadurai's (1996) extending of Anderson's (1983, 2006) concept of imagined communities to that of imagined worlds and imagination as social practice brilliantly extends and informs the conceptualizations- and analytical lenses of not 'only' global cultural processes but to so much more:

> The image, the imagined, the imaginary---these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.
>
> Arjun Appadurai, 1996, p. 31

Every individual, extending to collectives, actors such as state/media institutions, engage in practices of imagining communities, worlds and subjects affected by global cultural flows. Global, national as well as local imaginings filled with collective/individual desires, invent and reinvent life and communities. Media as a culturally organized practice constitutes

in a sense a *producer* of hegemonic imagining, laying down a framework of imagination. Defining the different types of global flows, Appadurai treats them as landscapes; ethnoscapes, mediascapes, financescapes, technoscapes and ideoscapes. The fluid and irregular shapes of these landscapes point to the dynamics of imagining; it is in a dynamic manner shaping the ways notions of culture, people or nation can be understood which are further affected by the varying perspectives possible to be assumed: angles of vision and 'situatedness' of actors alter the scope of possible imagining. Media institutions hold especially strong positions of vision and of power within mediascapes constantly vying for hegemony. Appadurai explains the *need* for an extension of Anderson's communities to worlds:

> […]An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just imagined communities) and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the *official mind* and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them.
>
> Appadurai, 1996, p. 33 (my italicization)

Conceptualizing imagined *worlds* enables the contestation of hegemonic imagined communities, enabling us to resist co-imagining of a "forced" way of life. Furthermore Audrey Yue (2014) explains that with use of Appadurai's (1996) suffix '-scapes', media scholars have coined the term 'queerscape' to develop a critical regionality framework (Yue, 2014, p. 148) and that this Asian queerscape as a new regional culture, is one formed through a process of "multidirectional flows of queer globalization" across Asia. It constitutes a research practice that aims to destabilize hegemonic cinematic sexual and gender norms by exploring new emerging worlds of queer Asian media cultures borne out of the globalization of LGBT cultures. The key point here is that globalization of LGBT cultures are not creating *sameness*, rather, the intermingling between 'global forces' and 'nativist' queer flows spark hybridization as a result of resistance. The concept of *minor transnationalism* entails a critique of such binary models of cultural formation that posits majority and minority cultures in a vertical relationship of dominance and resistance i.e. West-East. To truly capture the complexities of global cultural queer flows, be it (trans) national or local in affecting imagining of communities, people and worlds, it is necessary to see these as multidirectional emanating from sites and practices irrespective of borders of nations. According to Yue these developments enable the contesting of normative family models and filial duties, further governed within neoliberal capitalism and are apt for the job of undermining the assimilation of LGBT culture onto mainstream media (Yue, 2014, p. 151).

1.5.2 Representation & Culture

To further understand the dynamic processes of imagining within various - scapes affected by *global* (multi-directional) *flows*, it is also necessary to consider representation and culture and the languages of them both. Stuart Hall (2013) in *Representation* (Hall, Evans & Nixon (red.) 2013) talks about two systems of representation; first and foremost come the objects, people or events that we relate to certain ideas or concepts, even "mental representations". The second system of representation is comprised of our language(s) and Hall emphasizes the importance of not thinking of language as merely the spoken word, but also of being of the bodily gestures, facial expressions, clothing or "language of fashion" and so on so forth (Hall, 2013, p. 3-4). To quote Hall as he defines language in a broader sense:

> Any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, 'a language'.
>
> <div align="right">Hall, 2013, p. 5</div>

Regardless of whether we talk about objects or abstract notions, our words or gestures act as signs which in turn instill meaning. Hall explains that as we say we belong to the same culture, it is because we to some extent share the same conceptual maps which enable us to make sense of the world in somewhat similar ways (Hall, 2013, p. 3-4). The sharing of conceptual maps is one such element that is affected by global flows and it is interesting to find that we are able to become all the more knowledgeable of other ways of seeing the world. With this in mind, the character as a detective within the police station will be related and thought of in relation to notions such as upholding the law, justice, crime fighting, bureaucracy so on and so forth. Further emphasizing the notion of culture as language is Chris Barker (2002) in *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* where he explains culture of being constitutive of variations of different languages. In tune with Hall above, language is not only verbal, rather a language can be said to be anything that organizes signs to create meanings in any way or form (Barker, 2002, p. 38).With this extension and broadening of our analytical lens, we may be able to explore and discover new meanings as our perception of what constitutes *signs* widens. However, Barker problematizes the discrepancy between the textual and performances in semiotic cultural analysis of actors:

> The problem is that semiotics and the metaphor of the text have led too many writers to conclude that they need not do empirical work; rather, actors' understandings are implied by or 'read off' texts.
>
> <div align="right">Chris Barker, 2002, p. 39</div>

Barker further problematizes this in relation to the post-structuralist concept of the 'subject position', he emphasizes and urges that rather than to assume audiences as reproducing the textual subject positions, it is imperative that we take into account what actual people are doing in specific situations in their interactions with texts (Barker, 2002, p. 39). Analysing meaning as I imagine its implementation through performance in TV fiction thus necessitates wariness of the fluctuant and myriad ways of interpretations that can be made. I do not investigate the ways audience may interpret and signify their TV fictional experience, nevertheless this becomes relevant on a theoretical level as I myself embody and enact the role of a viewer. The audiences' understandings are constitutive of processes of interpretation and signifying of the object(s) in question who can be seen as filtering the media experience through their specific 'situatedness'. It is in this sense that we must move beyond the mere textual in order to achieve a greater comprehension of media as a social practice of signification.

1.5.3 Doing Masculinities

Masculinities are very much part of the imagining of communities, worlds and people within those collective spaces as they function as signs or even a *language of masculinity*. Raewyn Connell's by now classic *Masculinities* first published in 1995, has greatly influenced the scholarly theorization of *'men',* and masculinities. Conceptualizations such as a *doing* of masculinities in sociocultural spheres, and the dimensions of power attribution/distribution explained with the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 1995, 2005). Connell's conceptualizations and contextualizing of processes of *doing masculinities* show how identities are constructed and maintained in relation to patriarchal notions of sexuality, gender such as the example of patriarchal cultural signifying of gay men's lack of masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 143). The ways constructions of masculinities are intricately complex as is evident in knowledge production alone; in medicine, sociology, psychology and so on as they relate to distinct discursive formations. They have all co-created identities, imagined 'subjects' in imagined 'places', and specific ways of *'being'*. As Connell states

about 'gay' social identity: "*The category is now so well formed and readily available that it can be imposed on people whether they like it or not.*" (Connell 2005, p. 151). The notion of the '*gaydar*' comes to mind which builds upon the idea that some people possess the ability to identify or distinguish gay men (from straight men) through their perceived gender expression/performance. It assumes a direct correlation between sexuality and gender performance. Connell further explains the gendered construction of (homo) sexuality in reference to a quote by Damien Outhwaite, an informant:

> "[…] one of the things was that I was one of the first to wear hipster jeans when they came in – he thought of that as being gay. And the other thing that I did was that I used to carry my books around in a shoulder bag – he thought that was particularly gay too.
>
> Quoted in Connell, 2005, p. 151

This process reveals how different, albeit interconnected notions of identity intersect and tie together performance to distinct ways of *being*. The gendering, sexualizing or the imposing of an imagined identity onto Damien can be thought of as a result of a multitude of influences. The specific signs or symbols that signify 'gayness' are derived from constructions of gay subjects and practices, as they have been formulated in the name of knowledge/science, nation-state, health and none the least as they are constructed in media. These constructions become informed and re-negotiated with the exchange of ideas across (but also irrespective of) borders of nation-states in a globalized world affected by global cultural flows (See Jung, 2011, on Korean masculinities). The way we imagine and perceive gayness is often mutually shared in specific sociocultural contexts that enable us to understand and attach specific patterned behaviour and performance to specific bodies. These ways we imagine within the confines of our shared conceptual maps are to whatever degree, always susceptible to various influences that continuously alter and expand our comprehension of people and communities.

1.5.4 Sexual Citizenship & and doing Intimacies

Further understanding the conditioned and marginalized spaces that gay men inhabit through the signifying in Korean dramas can be understood through theorization of citizenship and intimacy. Sexuality plays a crucial part in nation-building and the ways citizenship is constructed. Kenneth Plummer (2003) inspires my understanding and conceptualization of sexual citizenship as being constitutive of processes of '*doing intimacy*'.

These processes are exemplified in his book *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*:

> Intimacy exists in the doing of sex and love, obviously, but also in the doing of families, marriages, and friendships, in child bearing and child rearing, and in caring for others. In these instances, intimacy is likely to have close links to particular kinds of gender, body projects, and feeling work. Bodies, feelings, identities, relationships, interactions, even *communities* –all are central in doing intimacies.
>
> <div align="right">Plummer, 2003, p. 13 (my italicization)</div>

What becomes intelligible is dependent on the ways intimacy can be performed, by whom and onto whom. It further explains and describes ways of understanding sexuality in broader ways than its discursive formations may allow. Plummer references to Arjun Appadurai's conceptualization of *globalization* as a series of *flows* to explain what he designates "*the social flows of late modern intimacies*" (Plummer, 2003, p. 20). As these so called flows of modern intimacies travel, they both carry and leave imprints on the sociocultural contexts they encounter, effectively influencing and being influenced. The result of one such process is what can be understood as a merging of sociocultural intimacies. Plummer, talks about "new emerging groups" of citizens that constitutes what he designates an "issues culture" creating a new language of intimacies. This emergence can very well be understood as the result of multidirectional flows of intimacies that occur on a global scale today from various sites of sociocultural practices within the many –scapes. A new language of intimacies as it is reworked, imagined through media, serving as an example, enables a claim of space within the normative boundaries, it amounts to a challenging of the naturalized order of communities. Certainly, in the same way that Plummer(2003) explains the rise of individualism (with Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck) as the "fated", "strongest current" (Plummer, 2003, p. 3) affecting and leading people in their lives – this further affects not only how subjects envisage themselves in specific sites of imagining, but also with whom, where, and how? Plummer's discussion of traditional citizenship theorization(s) that have argued that rights and responsibilities of citizens as being 'inalienable' or 'natural' goes against contemporary writers that suggest, rights and responsibilities are rather created and placed into ideas of citizenship, community and identity through humans activities (Plummer, 2003, p. 56). Such an example could very well be the portrayal or representations of gay life experience in TV fiction, a "human activity" that reinvents notions of citizenship, identity and

community as a whole, by making them intelligible in an already existing 'naturalized' order.

1.6 Methodology

In this section I go over the methodological choices I have made that I find most appropriately can address and answer the questions I aim to explore throughout this essay. The core methodological approach I will employ is that of semiology. As I explore these Korean dramas as practices of *imagining*, this imagining should be understood as a signifying medium.

1.6.1 Semiotics – the Interpretation of Signs

It is with the help of 'reading' signs that we can assess the signifying of the gay characters in the Korean dramas that comprise my material. The language of signs, 'semiotics' or 'semiology', as first inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure, an academic that taught linguistics in the 20th century, inspires my analysis of media. Saussure emphasized the centrality of language, rather than it being peripheral, in creating meaning. He declared language or linguistics as only a part of a much broader science, that one day in the future to come; there would be such a thing as Semiology (Bignell, 2002, p. 5). Semiotics has since been further developed as to comprise not only the textual but also the visual in terms of images, film or bodily gestures and more. Jonathan Bignell's (2002) *Media Semiotics*: *An Introduction,* informs my methodological approach: he explains semiotics as being an interpretative method for analysing meanings as we perceive or interpret them through signs in the form(s) of symbols, text or individual words and more(ibid.) The signs are further organized within systems that can be understood as containing codes. Bignell uses the example of 'dress codes' to describe these systems, specific set of clothes that signify formality as opposed to informality – attending a wedding/working out at the gym (Bignell, 2002, p. 10). Both the visual and aural signs are of central importance in analysing media; images and graphics, music, sound or speech are **denotative** in so far as they, as mere words or objects connect us to the **concrete** – for instance the make of cars, to use Bignell's example: *the **Rolls Royce*** (Bignell, 2002, p 16). Beyond the denotative level of the Rolls Royce being a **car** of a **specific making**, it may also be associated to ideas of luxury and wealth. These ideas represent in Semiotics '***connotations***' or '**extra associations**' as Bignell calls them, which are triggered

through the *[…] labelling function of these signs to communicate a fact* (ibid.). Furthermore there is the **mythic level**, which Bignell explains with reference to Barthes account of the practice of wrestling:

> Myth, as Barthes uses the term, means things used as signs to communicate a social and political message about the world. The message always involves the distortion or forgetting of alternative messages, so that myth appears to be simply true, rather than one of a number of different possible messages.

> Bignell, 2002, p. 21

In the Korean drama "*You're All Surrounded*" there is a plot involving a Roll's Royce. Interestingly, in relation to Bignell's example above, the owner of the car conforms and fulfils the expectations of the connotations of what and who might be in possession of such a car: a rich and successful person living in a nice neighbourhood. The owner of the Royce is someone with a refined fashion sense and style. His wealth gives him power, not only materially, but through coercion, placing him above the law. This particular plot within the series, explains well the capacity of semiotic analysis in TV fiction. Just as we denote the Rolls Royce of being of a special make of cars, we also further associate (connote) it to notions of luxury, wealth or style and so on. It further reaches the mythic level of confirming our expectations of the car's conditioned and distinct existence, it cannot exist just anywhere, it must existence where it "is natural" for it to exist. Furthermore, it communicates meanings about good, evil and greed where one prevails over the other. Here it is also helpful to think about what Stuart Hall (2013) designates as 'conceptual maps' in reference to culture. The denotative, connotative, and mythic levels can thus be understood as being the inner structure of these conceptual maps that we share among each other, within cultures. The specific of the Roll Royce car's existence is something that most would be able to connect to that of a person with plenty of money to spend. The mythic level of signification shows how our imagining is also conditioned, we cannot imagine as freely, as we may think, thus we also imagine communities, worlds and the people in accordance with what is contextually intelligible.

1.6.2 Semiotics and Analysing Television Fiction

Thus, in analysing TV fiction with a foundation in semiotics, it will be necessary to consider the objects, the environments that the characters appear in, and their supposed or implied relation to these as they all come to constitute imagined worlds. With mention to Bignell's example, what connotations are made in a scene where a character acts out the role of a detective in the context of a police station?

When Jonathan Bignell (2002) talks about analysing *the codes* of television – he refers to a *system of television*. This system can be understood as a hub from which numerous components branch: imagining this system allows one to become familiar with how television fiction creates meaning and how it is further understood (Bignell, 2002, p. 158). It can be likened to that of a reciprocal relationship of signifying practices: the objects become identified through our conceptual maps but they are further interpreted by our very specific 'situatedness'. All subjects within any system of signifying practices contribute in creating and sustaining that very system but in distinct ways regulated through relations of power among subject positions. That is to say, while the characters are imagined as well as the scenes, and then embodied on a set – meaning is created through the representations of the objects and characters but also in relation to the viewers' signifying gaze. I myself embody the role of the viewer that, in my interpretation of the visual, co-creates the fiction. Situating myself as a heterosexual, cis-gender white undergraduate student exploring the imagining of gay characters in Korean dramas – in what ways does this affect my interpretations?

2. Imagining communities, worlds and the gay men that inhabit them

From the sequence of a semiotic analysis, I will first assess the **denotative** levels in each of the scenes I have selected, which is marked by the labelling of a sign, for instance the Rolls Royce being a car of a specific making. Secondly, I will point out the **connotative** level i.e. the connotations or extra associations we make as we behold the Rolls Royce: luxury and wealth and so on. The third level, the **mythic** – the ways the signs in a scene operate to communicate a hegemonic meaning (a myth) that distorts or causes a forgetting of other alternative ways of signifying (imagining), as to naturalize the myth. My research questions that lead me through the analysis are:

- How do signs (denote, connote, and mythicize) operate to communicate naturalizing meanings of heteronormativity through the signifying of gay male characters?
- How do Korean dramas signify (denote, connote) these characters?
- How can we detect the effect of global multidirectional flows within Korean dramas as signifying practices of imagining communities, worlds or people?

Inspired by the combination of imagining (communities, worlds, and people) as social practice affected by global multidirectional flows and how such imaginings are situated I now proceed to analyse these sample scenes from the aforementioned Korean dramas.

2.1 *'You are all surrounded'* **(2014)**

As I have previously mentioned in my presentation of my material, this drama series can be placed within the genre of '*Crime*' TV dramas. While the romantic involvement between Eun Dae Gu and co-detective Eo Soo Sun occupy the central stage, the developing relationship between Park Tae-il and Ji Gook enjoys a fair amount of screen time, and a position is laid out for the viewer to be assumed in regards to this.

2.1.1 Imagining a gay rookie police detective – Park Tae-il

The focus of my analysis lies in the way Park Tae-il becomes signified as *'being'* gay. This in his interaction with other characters, in relation to performance, and the objects he becomes connected with as the series progresses. The very first impression of Tae-il denotes a well-dressed, good-looking young man. This is shown and accentuated by the entire scene that revolves around the four recruits' first entry into the office of the police academy. Upon entering, they are subjected to objectifying gazes of teenage girls, shouting in awe at the sight of the recruits.

The denotative elements are constituted by Tae-il's specific clothing, the white shirt, suspenders, the wrist-watch that not only signify an intelligible 'style' but also play into how police detectives in the context of an office are *imagined* (See Figure 1, below).

Figure 1. *You're All Surrounded*, **2014, episode 2: Ji-Gook & Tae-il entering the office of the Gangnam police station.**

The denotative that I have made note of above, come into play in the scene where we are first invited into Tae-il and Ji-Gook's shared room in their apartment. At the very start of the scene where, moments before Ji-Gook enters Tae-il's room (what is understood as Tae-il's room until the conclusion of that scene), the audience can see that Tae-il is holding up a photo of a young man smiling, he watches it while drinking red wine. We get the sense of Tae-il reminiscing, becoming nostalgic and deep in thought of longing for someone dear to him. Tae-il is suddenly disrupted by Ji-Gook entering who consequently declares that the two will be sharing the room. Ji-Gook, upon Tae-il asking why, explains that he cannot stay in the same room with a person like Eun-Dae Gu with reference to their differing and incompatible personalities. Ji-Gook prepares the bottom bunk on the bunk bed, moving one of the pillows onto the top bunk as he rants, to which Tae-il asks: "you're going to use the top bunk?" Ji-Gook surprised by his question simply says: "Yeah. Huh?" and apologizes for simply claiming the bottom bunk without considering Tae-il's preference.

Tae-il then gets up out of his chair and adjusts the pillow on the top bunk standing in front of Ji-Gook and says reassuringly as he maintains eye-contact: "*It doesn't matter. It's who you sleep with that's important. Not where you sleep.*" Tae-il then pats Ji-Gook on his upper arm as he walks back to sit on the chair by the desk. Ji-Gook seemingly flabbergasted by Tae-il (having displayed such "nice" qualities) becomes excited declaring that everything else about Tae-il is nice as well, making note of the **scented candles**, **tofu**, **clock** and **wine** that Tae-il surrounds himself with (See Figures 2, and 3, below).

Figure 2. *You're All Surrounded*, **2014. Episode 2: Tae-il, in his room in the shared apartment, watching a photo.**

Figure 3. *You're All Surrounded*, **2014. Episode 2: Ji-Gook & Tae-il become roommates.**

The denotative level of the arrangement of these signs, enable for specific connotations to be made. The signs' connotative level(s) link us to specific imaginings that are borne out of the interwoven meanings created in their unison on screen. The scented candles, tofu, and wine trigger the connotations of luxury, elegance, romance, intimacy and so

on. These, in relation to the shot of Tae-il moments before, holding the photo of a young man dear to him contribute toward creating him and the moment in a very distinct way. It becomes clear that the viewer position has been designated as to allow us to see something specific through the sequence of signs presented. Applying the ideas of shared **conceptual maps** help shed light on the ways these signs operate to create and naturalize a hegemonic **mythic level** of 'gayness', gay identity or a 'gay way of *being*'.

The naturalization of the myth is best understood in terms of the shared conceptual maps we possess – the communication of Tae-il as 'gay' depend on a shared cultural perception of 'what', 'who' and 'where' gay men are. Even as this is a Korean production, I too share the conceptual map that enables the imposing of a gay identity (Connell, 2005, p. 151) onto Park Tae-il: this truly poses a striking example of the effects of global flows (Appadurai, 1996). This distinct way becomes 'gay' because it has been naturalized or 'mythicized'. Consider Tae-il holding a photograph of a woman, holding a beer and having a plate with a sandwich placed on the desk. It is then we are allowed to see how specific signs operate to create specific subjects and performance in the worlds we imagine. It would still be wise to consider the fluidity of identity and performance which can also simply be said to construct a specific Korean masculinity, not necessarily a gay identity. Jung (2011) with reference to the British journalist Mark Simpson's account of metro sexuality is helpful in understanding this:

> […] a metrosexual refers to a man who makes an effort to cultivate an aesthetic style and good taste on fashion, beauty, art and culture. While a metrosexual may embrace lifestyle habits that are commonly identified as typically belonging to fashionable, urban homosexual men, the term usually refers to heterosexual men who are seen to be more in touch with their feminine side.

> Sun Jung, 2011, p. 66

Jung proceeds to explain with the example of Bae-Yong-Joon, the Korean wave star, which many like him, follow in this trend of assuming a metrosexual way of being. Nonetheless, the way we are introduced to Tae-il in the scene with Ji-Gook, seeks to position us in a way to imagine him as gay. Bignell explains this sort of positioning as an ideological operation that set up a specific subject position for the viewer to assume – distinct signs are put in place for viewers to enter into these discursive subject positions (Bignell, 2002, p. 165). Then as we think of media as part of the social practice that is imagining communities, worlds,

and people, we must see how they are permeated by ideology. They lock us into specific limited but dominant modes of vision that obscure alternative ways of imagining. In that same sense may my specific 'situatedness', or any viewer for that matter, generate or reproduce such naturalizing of one 'way of being' against alternatives (See Bignell, 2002, p. 21).

Interestingly enough, with the concepts of global multi-directional flows, transcultural flows or just globalization itself, we allow ourselves to think beyond the constraints of the conceptualization(s) of nation-states that overlook the impact of "foreign" influence. Speaking of ideologies, be it gender regimes or racial regimes and so on so forth, it is imperative that we see how these too are distinct but still intensely subjected to hybridization processes and are very susceptible to "foreign" influences in the 'era of globalization'. It is no wonder that I can pick up on- and assume the position laid out before me in the TV Drama and see Tae-il as 'metrosexual' or 'gay', however what I will overlook is the distinct, the contextual subtleties inherent and endemic to Korean ideologies such as neo-Confucianism or familism.

This is a testament to how, much like any social practice, imagining is a situated locale of global hybridized flows ,whose imaginings all take part in their own ways in contesting a grand hegemonic imagining in itself shaped by those very flows.

2.2 *'Secret Garden'* **(2010)**

As mentioned in the material's section, this drama, much like the majority of Korean dramas, are love or romance-themed. The focus of my analysis of this series lies in the relations- and interactions between 'Oska', the Korean Wave star and the "rookie singer" Han Tae Sun, however all boiled down to one moment, where Tae Sun "outs" himself.

2.2.1 Imagining a gay musician - 'Tae Sun'

It is not until a very specific scene and moment in the TV drama that the viewers come to learn of Tae Sun's sexuality. Up until that time, all that could be seen is that he is acting on a specific 'metrosexual soft masculinity' or that of a young male musician with a "sense of fashion" or style (see Jung, 2011, p. 66). Moments before this scene, we see that Oska has seemingly reserved an entire restaurant for himself and Gil Ra Im. Tae Sun takes the stage and performs a song.

Oska didn't realise that he had then robbed Tae Sun of his audience. After his rather short performance, Tae Sun leaves the stage and Oska heads after him in pursuit. In the conversation that follows, Oska confronts Tae Sun. The whole exchange appears to be concluded with Tae Sun turning to walk away when Oska suddenly grabs Tae Sun's wrist out of frustration of not being allowed to express himself fully.

As they settle the argument, Oska still holds Tae Sun's wrist in a firm grip, where Tae Sun warns him: "*I got it, so let go when I ask nicely.*" Oska doesn't let go and taunts Tae Sun to which Tae Sun then says: *"This is the first time I'm saying anything for your sake, Mr Hallyu Star. I like men.*" Oska becomes stunned and starts to blabber insecurely (See Figure 4, below).

Figure 4. *Secret Garden,* **2010, episode 5: Oska grabs Tae Sun's wrist firmly.**

In this scene, on the denotative level, we can identify the specific language of fashion that Hall (2013) exemplifies in his theorization of the systems of language mentioned earlier in this essay (Hall, 2013, p. 3-4). The language of fashion in this scene articulates this specific 'global metrosexual masculinity' that Jung (2011) locates within the concept of 'soft masculinity' in relation to the Korean wave star Bae-Yong Joon (Jung, 2011, p. 39). Their 'styles' do not represent or construct an immediate and explicit 'gayness' per se, not even implicitly. The ways this language (of fashion) is signified depends on the situatedness of the viewers, even as the idea of metrosexuality travels through global flows, it is imperative to understand how meanings are contextually specific in the process of hybridization (Jung, 2011, p. 11-12). That is to suggest, viewers situated in one place in the world may understand this particular language of fashion as signifying 'gayness' while to Koreans it may just signify men "[…] *who make an effort to cultivate an aesthetic style and good taste on fashion*[…]"(Jung, 2011, p. 66). It is also crucial to note as much as a language of fashion

may signify metrosexuality or homosexuality, there is also *language of bodies*. Just as well as clothes function as signs, so do bodies, thus in order to make either metrosexual or gay men intelligible as such, there must be a correlation to the imagined masculine/male body. It is when we consider the *bodily gestures*' denotative, connotative and mythic meanings that we can imagine this *doing* of 'gayness' and the distinct state of (in)-visibility it establishes. It is the expansion of the concept of 'language' which enables us to see how the act of 'grabbing someone's wrist', conveys, contains, and is attributed meaning (Hall, 2013, p. 3-4, Barker, 2002, p. 38, Bignell, 2002, p. 14 on 'visual signs').

The scene then denotes two male bodies whereas one physically "claims" the other, signifying an uneven relation of power between the two bodies. As soon as Tae Sun 'comes out' as gay, a process of signifying *difference* occur: suddenly the two bodies that on the denotative and connotative levels mirrored each other become differentiated on both the connotative and mythic levels. This means that the language of fashion that Tae Sun previously embodied comes to shift in meaning – rather than to signify 'metrosexuality' it comes to signify 'gayness' because of language functioning as a system of difference (See Bignell, 2002, p. 9). The distinct meaning of one sign requires the contrasting of another to assess its particular signification. The mythic level in the scene can be read by the way the two bodies are signified into a dichotomized order of differentiation: active/passive, superior/subordinate subject positions respectively. This can be seen between Kim Jo Woon and Gil Ra Im's story progression which presupposes a masculinized active heterosexual male that chases after the feminized passive heterosexual female (Kim Jo Woon & Gil Ra Im). Thus, for heteronormative order to maintain its mythic status, this binary construction of power relations of an active, superior masculine (body), and passive subordinate feminized (body) counterpart - are carried over onto the signified (imagined gay and straight respectively) bodies of Tae Sun and Oska.. The grabbing of the wrist is an action that is reserved, expected and carried out by the masculinized bodily subject. This shows how gay men enter into a conditioned existence within the heteronormative frame: the ways they can exist is always in the subordinate feminized position to the heterosexual masculinized man. It creates the heterosexual male as different from the homosexual in order to maintain the myth of heteronormativity: we are in a sense already positioned so as to be able to hold this view (Bignell, 2002, p. 165).

2.3 '*Life is Beautiful*' (2010)

It differs significantly from both "You're all surrounded" and "Secret Garden" in the sense that it makes an active and intentional choice of portraying a "full experience" of these gay characters. Unlike the other dramas, the processes of signifying 'homosexuality', 'gayness' or '*being gay*' in Life is Beautiful, is continuous and takes on a multitude of forms and contexts, largely in and around the family. The scenes I have selected demonstrate how Tae Sub and Kyung Soo become signified as 'gay' in the subject positions of *family-oriented* discourse such as filial duty, in relation to the metaphor of the 'closet' and of coming/being 'out' and notions of 'normality'. I will argue that the story, in imagining gay men- and life, challenge a mythicized naturalized heteronormative order by acts of 'claiming space of articulation' previously only reserved to the heterosexual signified, yet it still reinforces this myth by the constant stigmatizing and contrasting of these gay characters as leading dark, cold and lonely lives, as opposed to the straight characters' lives.

2.3.1 Imagining gay men's lives

The ways we become aware of the two characters as 'gay', or at the very least 'romantically involved', is through the very first time we see them together at a restaurant. Tae Sub updates Kyung Soo on his relationship status where he explains that he and 'Chae Young' are through. Tae Sub explains he had told her he doesn't 'see' her as a woman. Kyung Soo is very disappointed with Tae Sub, and tells him it isn't enough, he should have been clearer. From this moment on we start to understand what differentiates the two: Tae Sub as 'closeted' and Kyung Soo as 'out'. These two states constitute signs, the metaphor of the 'closet' and the state of being 'out' (of that confined 'space'), are first introduced later, even as we may already have assessed their individual situations as such. In the following episode Tae Sub has returned home, to his family home located on Jeju Island. We see him enter into his room to undress, his stepmother Kim Min Jae enters to bring him food and urges him to wash up and then go to sleep. As Tae Sub leaves to shower, Min Jae seizes the opportunity to go through his phone's inbox.

While scrolling, all she can see are messages from Kyung Soo and reads it out "aloud" until she finally spots 'Chae Young', to which she promptly grabs a notebook and pen to write down the number. Tae Sub suddenly comes out of the shower finding Min Jae with his phone and he asks her what she is up to: "[…] was there a phone call?" Min Jae comes clean and says she and Yang Byung Tae (Tae Sub's father) are dying to find out about Chae Young, what she looks like, and to invite her over for dinner. Tae Sub concludes the conversation by declaring that he got dumped by Chae Young, and asks Min Jae to stop digging into his private life (See Figure 5, below).

Figure 5. *Life is beautiful*, 2010. Episode 2: Chae Young, rifles through Tae Sub's inbox and finds that nearly all messages are from Kyung Soo

These very first few scenes introduce and position us to see that Kyung Soo and Tae Sub are romantically involved and to see the precarious nature of their relationship. Min Jae grows increasingly worried about Tae Sub (being in his 30s and still not married), and feels obligated as his mother to meddle in his private life and choice of potential life partner. His family repeatedly discuss Tae Sub's relationship status or lack of, repeatedly on numerous occasions, much to Tae Sub's discomfort. It is the recurring focus of conversation and Tae Sub is generally expressing his discomfort in his evasive responses, it is very much as if he attempts to make himself less visible.

In the second episode, Kyung Soo comes to visit Tae Sub at work and while he's on his way to have a medical check-up (Tae Sub is a medical doctor). Kyung Soo came by to apologize for his emotional outburst the last time they met at the restaurant, explaining that he had an argument with his mother over his choice of a 'different path'. Kyung Soo explains that his mother thought his change of path was a result of spending time with 'bad acquaintances'. As they are about to part, Kyung Soo puts his hand onto Tae Sub's shoulder, and Tae Sub puts his hand onto Kyung Soo's (See Figure 6, below).

Figure 6. *Life is Beautiful*, **2010. Episode 2: A moment of intimacy between Tae Sub & Kyung Soo**

The ways these two characters, Kyung Soo and Tae Sub are being signified as 'gay' is through a *doing* of intimacies (See Plummer, 2002.). Here we can think of intimacies as *signs*: conveying meanings on denotative, connotative and mythic levels. Furthermore, these denotative signs, such as expressions of affection through the hand being placed onto the shoulder of Tae Sub, and his hand onto the hand of Kyung Soo, simply denote two male bodies interacting through touch. Connotatively they signify a certain level of intimacy assumed and reserved to the heterosexual couple within the normative model of family life and love. This scene constitutes a claim of such a space of articulation to ultimately challenge the naturalized hegemony of heterosexual intimacies by actively imagining these articulations of intimacy by two male bodies. The myth is continuously disintegrated through these imaginings, the signifying of intimacies or even love.

Instead of the more concrete denotative levels of the objects in 'You're all surrounded' (the tofu, scented candles or wine), we need to apply more of the denotative interpretations employed in my analysis of '**Secret Garden**' i.e. the ways gay 'performance' is signified in '**Life is Beautiful**'. The practices of signification are overall constituted by verbal practices and the doing of intimacies between Tae Sub and Kyung Soo and their interactions with their respective families. This is exemplified in the scene where Kyung Soo argues with his mother. In that scene, she begs Kyung Soo to reconsider his 'choice of path'

and to ultimately return to his divorced wife, for the sake of their child 'Soo Na'. With reference to their 'blood-line' being at stake and even appealing to Kyung Soo's sense of fatherhood, Kyung Soo's mother pleads (See Jackson et al. in Cho, 2012, p. 18). She exclaims: "If you just let her go like that, she'll no longer be your child." To which Kyung Soo replies: "Is she going to give her to me? Can she leave her here and leave?" His mother replies: "She can't give her to a father like you."

The remainder of the conversation, increasing in intensity, revolves around Kyung Soo's mother urging him to "live a normal life", "many like you get married and live normal lives". She further urges Kyung Soo to think of his family, his father. The scene comes to a close when Kyung Soo has finally had enough of arguing with his mother and urges her to leave as he makes his way to his bedroom. The intention of the director/writer becomes especially clear in this moment in the angle of vision from the 'dark area' and the specific dialogue to go with it. The viewers are positioned as to pick up on the visual and verbal interplay as the remainder of the conversation goes as follows and Kyung Soo's mother exclaims: "It is cold over there." Kyung Soo: "Yes, it's cold. It's very cold. Do you want me to freeze to death?" This is one of the many times the metaphor of the closet comes to signify a gay life and *being* (See Figure 7, below).

Figure 7. *Life is Beautiful*, **2010. Episode 15: Kyung Soo's mother begs him to rethink his choice of path.**

Even as Kyung Soo is 'out', he is still "relegated" to the compartmentalized spaces of gay life, in the drama more so because of the alienation from his family. Being gay is also largely signified around the notion and sign of 'normality', where the signs of 'family', 'daughter', and 'father' form a joint meaning of this state of normalcy. Being 'gay' is signified as a lonely, cold and pitiful life. This extreme divide functions to naturalize the myth of heteronormativity and the family in filial/paternal duty by its construction as an 'only

good/happy life'. Much of the experiences in the portrayal of Kyung Soo & Tae Sub's experience in their everyday life in regards to familial pressure can be related to Cho's (2012) dissertation. The desire to lead a normal life, 'aspirational normativity' is an often recurring theme (Berlant in Cho, 2012, p. 155). The notion of 'normal life' and the metaphor of the 'closet' is arguably the core signifying of gay life in this TV drama – it is around these concepts gay life becomes intelligible.

3. Concluding discussion

In this paper's introductory section I enquired about the location of gay men in South Korea, what could explain their conditioned existence? Relying on Korean dramas, treating them as manifested imaginations, I found with a semiotic 'reading' of signs, systems and codes constituted by signs that operate to *signify* gay lives and characters within the frame of heteronormativity. These systems of signs i.e. languages of gender, sexuality, fashion, bodily shapes/gestures and more, are arranged on the basis of signifying *difference*, normality is established by means of stigmatization. This dichotomous imagining effectively polarizes straight and gay life to the extent where the *properties* of one are inherently opposite of the other. The heteronormative maintains its mythic status by imposing its binary gender differentiating power structure: a dominating masculinized active and a subordinate feminized passive placed onto the signified gay subjects. Indeed as Bignell (2002) explained about Barthes use of the term *myth*, it is used to distort other messages about the world with use of signs, as to create one truth. Heteronormativity as myth then as shown in my analysis of these Korean dramas, distort alternatives, naturalizes itself rather than it constituting a number of possible messages, by imposing its specific coded structure onto those that would subvert it.

The ways characters become signified as gay in these Korean dramas are diverse but precise. Some through the utterance of lingual signs such as the word 'gay' exemplified in the scene where Tae Sun 'comes out' to Oska (*Secret Garden*, 2010). The signifying of gay characters has also largely occurred through objects in arrangement: wine, scented candles, tofu and of actions or bodily gestures. Referring to the scene with Ji-Gook and Tae-il (*You're All Surrounded*, 2014), specific objects connote relaxation, romance, cultivation, and luxury but also to gestures or actions acting as signs i.e. patting someone's shoulder or looking into another's eyes, one man beholding another man on a photo frame. A multitude of signs are at work to attribute 'gayness' onto these subjects and the meanings of being gay. With Tae Sub

and Kyung Soo (*Life is Beautiful*, 2010) we see similar signs at work but the drama adopts more compelling visual signs such as in the example of the scene with Kyung Soo and his mother. When Kyung Soo urges his mother to leave he turns to go into his bedroom, she urges him not to go into that *dark place*, it's very cold. The dark and cold room signifies not only Tae Sub and Kyung Soo as gay men but also gay life in itself.

To break with this rather dismal account of overall imagining of gay life in Korean dramas, the effects of global flows, in their myriad forms, allow us to detect the hybridized notions of imagined gay lives that challenge this mythicized order. In comparing the different drama series, we can discover how they portray 'gayness' in specific ways that are very much shaped by multidirectional flows of culture. These Korean media productions as well as other global, national and local community sites such as LGBT rights/human rights organisations, in their linkages to these circuits of flows, gradually extend space of articulation for marginalized subjects, groups or communities (See Bong, 2008, Choo, 2007). It is in the strategic choices such as the forming of the AsiaPacificQueer network (Yue, 2014) to develop concepts of queer hybridity, critical regionality and minor transnationalism to counter hegemonies on knowledge production and media. It is also the effects of the not so coordinated collectivized practices of consumers of cultural products in the form of tourism, shopping and cultivating of styles (Chua, in Jung, 2011). It has broadened the ways we are *able* to imagine ourselves and our lives as we are all the more exposed to alternative ways of life. Even while LGBT characters are at large posited in the margins of TV fiction narratives in Korea, the promise lies in the progressive emergence of queer subjects into normative media. With Connell (2005) and Jung (2011) we are able to detect truly complex manifestations of diverse masculinities inherent in the imagining of Korean communities, how specific such masculinities become tied to sexualities or intimacies.

There is global cultural exchange mediated by discursive flows – we detect the globalized sign 'gay' in these dramas that signify the actual (yet still also imagined) united gay community of the world. Furthermore that which may be the most central to the global queer flows (Yue, 2014) evident in these Korean fictions is the "Western" tropes of the closet, of 'coming out' and what these represent as discussed by Cho(2012) and its limited applicability to the East-Asian context. Globalization has made possible a globally imagined gay life even as it fails to accurately depict the realities of gay men in the world, overlooking the intersections of gender, "race", ethnicity, nationality, (dis)ability, age and more.

3.1 Final reflections

Scholarly works have much been dedicated on exploring the extent of effects of Americanisation onto signified *others* be it in accordance with the West-East divide, the global North/South. Even as critiques have been formed within and around the crossroads of post-colonial, Asian, queer studies such as hybridity and critical regionality in countering a cultural homogenizing thesis, it is all too concerned with the context of Western cultural forces onto these signified others. Despite conceptualizations such as the *global flows* as *multidirectional* and emanating from situated queer spatial/temporal localities, still the core turn in this exploration of global cultural hegemony remains. Few have mentioned the rise of Asia and even as they do what exactly and how is it rising? The Korean wave as one but not alone, is this grand force that in its wake is not causing homogenization of cultures past its borders – it is causing a hybridizing of culture.

Globalization has been too focused on the signified other, and sure enough, while it is important to investigate and understand the impact of global cultural forces onto the formerly colonized and 'othered' – it is perhaps timely that we investigate the impact of globalization onto the North American 'West'. In what ways has it been in a cultural process of metamorphosis? As we direct these questions toward the often if not always assumed hegemon, what have we missed in the entirety of global cultural processes?

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4.1 List of South Korean TV Drama Productions

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You're All Surrounded (Neohuideureun Powidwaetda) Dir. Yu In-Sik. South Korea, 2014.

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4.3 List of Figures

4.3.1 *You're All Surrounded* (2014)

Fig.1 'The reason we are not detectives' (2014) Neohuideureun Powidwaetda, episode 2. Seoul Broadcasting System, 8th May.

Fig. 2 'The reason we are not detectives' (2014) Neohuideureun Powidwaetda, episode 2. Seoul Broadcasting System, 8th May.

Fig. 3 'The reason we are not detectives' (2014) Neohuideureun Powidwaetda, episode 2. Seoul Broadcasting System, 8th May.

4.3.2 *Secret Garden* (2010)

Figure 4 'Episode 5' (2010) Sikeurit Gadeun, episode 5. Seoul Broadcasting System, 27th November.

4.4.3 *Life is Beautiful* (2010)

Fig. 5 'Episode 2' (2010) Insaengeun Areumdawo, episode 2. Seoul Broadcasting System, 21st March.

Fig. 6 'Episode 2' (2010) Insaengeun Areumdawo, episode 2. Seoul Broadcasting System, 21st March.

Fig. 7 'Episode 15' (2010) Insaengeun Areumdawo, episode 15. Seoul Broadcasting System, 8th May.