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Korean Pop Music and the Appropriation of Hip-Hop Culture: How Korean Pop Music Appropriates Hairstyles Associated with Hip-Hop

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Korean Pop Music and the Appropriation of Hip-Hop Culture:
How Korean Pop Music Appropriates Hairstyles Associated with Hip-Hop

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

By
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2021

Acknowledgments

To All My Black K-Pop Fans!

To All My Friends and My Family who Provided that Necessary Push to Keep Me Going!

I Appreciate All of You so Much. You Mean The World To Me!

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Introduction

Korean Pop-Music, or K-Pop for short, has held a special place in my heart for the past few years. K-Pop describes the popular music that arguably originated in the once unified Korea that continued to evolve and flourish in South Korea when the country divided into North and South Korea. I first became familiar with K-Pop through my friends who showed me the music video for Ka-Ching!, a song by the boy group EXO in 2017. Since then, my interest with the genre and my appreciation for it has grown expanding to a diverse set of groups like Stray Kids, The Boyz, Twice, and so on. In my experience, K-Pop as a music genre has been a very immersive experience, offering a variety of different avenues for audiences to be a part of. Notably, the genre has catchy music, elaborate performances, and inventive and high quality music videos demonstrating a high attention to detail and ability to be engaging and conceptual. In addition, entertainment shows like Weekly Idol, Idol Room, and the ones created by the companies themselves serve to humanize the idols by placing them in comedic and occasionally, emotional situations. They allow viewers to emotionally connect with the idols by showcasing different aspects of their personalities that are not as easily accessible through stage performances and music videos. K-Pop does a great job of keeping fans engaged by churning out this content (music, performance stages, entertainment shows, and so on) quite frequently therefore keeping fans very engaged throughout the year.

However, as much as I do enjoy K-Pop and almost everything that comes with it, there are moments where as an African American fan it can be uncomfortable to engage with the genre. As an avid watcher of the variety of K-Pop content out there, there have been many instances of K-Pop idols alluding to other cultures in their artistry. Notably, elements of African American culture, particularly the Hip-Hop culture is often heavily referenced in the

stylings/fashion for performance stages. Similar to K-Pop, Hip-Hop is a multi-dimensional genre offering a variety of ways that people can engage with it. There are audible/oral aspects in the form of rap, lyricism, and DJing where turntables are used to create music, and visual aspects in the form of breakdancing/stage performances, graffiti, and fashion associated with the genre. While in and of itself not an issue, complications arise as fans note *how* and which elements of Hip-Hop culture K-Pop idols tend to use in their promotions. For example, during the promotions for his solo song, “Mmmh”, Kim Jong-in of EXO (also known professionally as Kai) wore a bedazzled du-rag throughout the music video and in some of the live stages. Similarly, Bang Chan of Stray Kids wore his hair in the cornrows style during a performance of “Zone”, a single with other Stray Kids’ members Han Jisung and Seo Changbin under the group name 3RACHA.

In each of these cases, discussions surrounding the implications and usage of these Hip-Hop styles have emerged. In spaces like Reddit, other black fans have noted a similar sense of uncomfortability and ire as me when seeing these idols wear articles of clothing or hairstyles associated with African Americans.¹ Within these spaces, many black fans have argued that K-Pop’s usage of hairstyles and fashion invented and popularized by African Americans are borderline offensive and a misrepresentation of their culture. These arguments take into account the conceptual nature of K-Pop which is partly achieved through the appropriate styling. Furthermore, fans note how when such criticisms are leveled at K-Pop other fans are quick to argue with them in defense of the celebrities adding to their frustrations.

These conversations on Reddit and personal feelings of discomfort provide the basis for

¹ Imheretostate “black culture within kpop is very obvious yet people still want to be racist towards the black community” r/unpopularpopopinions, Reddit, May 5, 2021
https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularpopopinions/comments/ecj4th/black_culture_within_kpop_is_very_obvious_yet/

this thesis. This project will explore how Hip-Hop culture is often accessorized in K-Pop as a part of the conceptual nature of the genre through a focus on the usage of Hip-Hop fashion like the du-rag and the hairstyle cornrows. Focusing on these elements will highlight that K-Pop is oftentimes quite reliant on elements of Hip-Hop culture, while at the same time does not take the time to fully flesh out the history and cultural background of the aspects they are using.

Essentially, this project works to understand the concept of cultural appropriation as it appears in Korean Pop music. To do this effectively, first we must define culture as a concept itself and why it is an issue for those whose culture is being appropriated. At the same time, we can perhaps answer the question of what role the culture being appropriated plays in the dominant culture. In this case, what does Hip-Hop culture mean to Korean pop music and by extension, South Korean culture in general as a whole. This project does not intend to gate keep Hip-Hop culture and prevent others from interacting with it because that is quite frankly impossible considering that we live in a very globalized world. Rather, this project is intended to note how globalization can in some cases lead to some ways of life being transformed and trivialized by others and hopes to find ways to rectify this. Furthermore, this project hopes to provide validation to the feelings of black K-Pop listeners whose frustration with K-Pop in this regard is oftentimes disregarded and silenced by others.

Chapter 1: Defining Culture and Cultural Appropriation

Culture as a Concept

To begin, a clearer understanding of the term culture has to be outlined, considering that this project deals quite heavily with the interactions and apparent misuse of one culture by another. Culture is a deceptively complex and broader term than one would think it is. For the purposes of this project, I am relying on both a sociological and anthropological summarizing of the word and definitions curated by individuals within these fields.

The term culture has been the topic of many academic discussions. There are around 300 interpretations of culture, as scholars throughout the years have created their own definitions while highlighting the flaws in some of the existing definitions. Attempts at defining culture, in an anthropological sense, are noted to have begun with Edward Burnett Tylor, who defined culture as “...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”² This definition is rather straightforward, arguing that culture is essentially a compilation of various social artifacts that individuals, apart of the culture in question, learn and perpetuate. In addition to this, according to Tylor, culture can be understood as a system of stages, where all cultures go through an evolutionary path going from “savage” to “barbarism” to “civilized” hinting at culture being something dynamic and evolving. While his implications are arguably rooted in racist ideals, I find this definition to be a good foundation and many definitions of culture that follow are arguably more nuanced versions of this original definition.³

² O’Neil, Dennis. “What is Culture” last modified May 26, 2006
https://www2.palomar.edu/anthro/culture/culture_1.htm

³ “Anthropological Culture Concept” *Lumen* accessed May 05, 2021
<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/culturalanthropology/chapter/anthropological-culture-concept/#:~:text=The%20first%20anthropological%20definition%20of,1920%20%5B1871%5D%3A%201>

A lot of definitions of culture build off of Tylor's established summary of the term. Definitions like ones proposed by professionals like Clifford Geertz, include the idea of culture being a system of symbols, where a "symbol being something that conventionally stands for something else—through which people make sense out of the world."⁴ These symbols can be the same items that Tylor articulated in his definition, (art, morals, laws, and so on). Note that these items are imbued with meanings that are typically connected and *reactive* to a larger societal positioning. This summary of culture also powerfully asserts that these symbols allow people to understand and perhaps structure and define the world that they live in order to survive and successfully navigate that world. Adding to this, George Hebrt Mead outlines in his theory of symbolic interactionism that "Culture is symbolic communication."⁵ Essentially, that members of these cultures communicate and then perpetuate these symbols in their everyday lives.

Alternatively, some definitions have focused on rituals, traditions, and practices as a way to outline culture. For example, as Micheal Winkelson outlines "The people who share culture, the learned patterns of behavior, are also referred to as culture. A culture thus refers to a group of people, as well as to the patterns of behavior which characterize the group and link it's members together."⁶ In these understandings, culture is interpreted to be the performance of rituals and traditions by a group of individuals and the community that forms is contingent on them. The performance aspect of the definition is extremely important because through performing rituals and such there is the implication that this allows for one to be considered a member of that group. At play here we see culture link to the ideas of kinship and identity formation.

⁴ "Cultural Anthropology" Oxford University Press Accessed May 5, 2021

⁵ Tracy Evans, Santa Ana College. "Cultural Anthropology." *Lumen*, courses.lumenlearning.com/culturalanthropology/chapter/anthropological-culture-concept/#:~:text=The%20first%20anthropological%20definition%20of,1920%20%5B1871%5D%3A%201).

⁶ Baldwin, John R. *Redefining Culture: Perspectives across the Disciplines*. Routledge, 2012.

Each definition of culture is extremely valuable in working to understand culture as a concept and offers important information to consider. Rather than picking a single definition that attempts to narrow down culture into a specific notion, I believe that one can combine the different definitions specifically, the elements that they are highlighting. For the purposes of this project, I argue that culture:

consists of patterns of behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional, historical ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952: 181)⁷

The definition of culture provided by Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn combines the varying elements of the definitions of culture that other researchers have outlined, noted above. This definition is powerful because it asserts that culture is not only a compilation of social artifacts, traditions, and rituals created by people, but it also notes that they inherently encompass that people's history, achievements, and allows them to define and structure the world for themselves. These social artifacts, traditions, and rituals are themselves symbolic of those histories and achievements. As I noted before, culture is oftentimes reactive to a group's social position thus the social artifacts, traditions, and rituals as symbols of a group's history and achievements become sacred and important to these people. Furthermore, if we believe this to be what culture is, it is arguable that it is also a physical embodiment of the social bonds that unite people together.

⁷ "What is Culture" *Speaking of Culture*. Accessed May 5, 2021

Hip-hop works as a multidimensional term that highlights a culture as well as cultural form. Hip-hop culture arose during the period of the 60's and 70's, when the South Bronx could only be described as burning.⁸ Landlords would pay arsonists to torch buildings as the payouts from the insurance companies were more than the rent they received from tenants, who oftentimes were too poor or simply resisted paying rent. Residents of the South Bronx were neglected by law makers across many fields such as health care, education, and job opportunities forcing South Bronx residents to turn to crime and gangs in order to support themselves.⁹ As many sources detailing this moment in history have explained, the South Bronx rapidly fell into ruin and became the symbol of urban decay and destitution across the United States.¹⁰ Furthermore, the heavy amounts of policing, encouraged by what is now known as the broken window theory,¹¹ led to the deaths and arrests of black and brown bodies which exacerbated the tension in the area. Noting the systematic disadvantages they had been experiencing for years, African American, Latino, and Caribbean youth turned their anger and discontent with the world they were living in into music.

Hip-hop culture can be described as an acknowledgement of black experiences in America starting from the 1970's to present day. Hip-Hop culture as a concept is believed to be an extension of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movements from the 40's and 50's. Encouraged by the likes of revolutionaries like Malcolm X, minority groups specifically African Americans, were pushed to be "self determined, self-reliant, and proud of their pursuit in order to

⁸ Independent Lens in Beyond Films "How the Burning of the Bronx Led to Birth of Hip-Hop" *PBS.org* Accessed May 5 2021

<https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/how-the-burning-of-the-bronx-led-to-the-birth-of-hip-hop/>

⁹ Ainsfield, Bench. "The Broken Window Theory of the Bronx: Putting the Theory into Place." John Hopkins University Press, March 2022. JSTOR

¹⁰ IBID. pg 2

¹¹ Broken windows theory, academic theory proposed by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in 1982 that used broken windows as a metaphor for disorder within neighbourhoods. Their theory links disorder and incivility within a community to subsequent occurrences of serious crime.

gain cultural autonomy.”¹²As I mentioned earlier in the project, Hip-Hop encompasses more than just music (specifically rap), but includes fashion, visual art, and dancing. Through this, black and brown youth were able to create a meaning for themselves in the world while refashioning everyday items into cultural symbols to represent their struggle. Rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy once compared hip-hop to the media in asserting that it is a source of communication and information to the Black community. He described hip-hop music as being “dispatchers of information...[it is] almost like headline news. Rap music is the invisible TV station that Black America never had.” Despite this mainstream popularity, the core ideologies of hip hop remain and are continued by participants. In particular, by youth of color who regard it as a cultural space to foster political engagement, resist racism, and challenge stereotypes crafted about black and brown youth by others. Additionally, youth around the world increasingly use hip hop for a sense of identity agency, to expand their identity possibilities and critique/resist the constraints of monolithic identity choices dictated by their societies.

Korean Pop Music does not have a specific cultural identity unlike Hip-Hop, primarily because it is composed of multiple different interactions from various sources. As we explore K-pop, throughout this paper I further build upon that statement. K-Pop, or rather the K-Pop stars more often than not do not have the same freedom to explore themselves in the same way that youth in Hip-Hop did, but interestingly the two did start out as a form of protest against an oppressive society.

As we move to defining cultural appropriation as a concept it is important to keep the understanding of culture defined above in mind. By working through this definition we can see why cultural appropriation is an issue especially for groups of people considered minorities.

¹² Iber, Jorge. George Emmett “Hip hop Culture” 2006

Cultural Appropriation as a Concept

If one understands that culture has a rich, complex history reaching back to the 19th century, on the other hand the concept of cultural appropriation is a relatively newer field of research. Research and the term itself first came into usage towards the end of the 20th century.¹³ Naturally, due to the newer nature of the term, cultural appropriation is a concept still being heavily debated across different areas of academics. Typically, the term serves as a critique of Western imperialism and domination of non-white forms. However, as this project tries to highlight cultural appropriation is not an issue that can be or should be boiled down to a phenomenon specific to the West or only done by white people. As one defines and outlines the phrase, one can see that any culture or group of people is liable to cultural appropriation as they interact with other cultures and peoples in our more globalized world. This adds to the complex nature of cultural appropriation as academics work to understand the term. Furthermore, adding to the complexity is that on its own the phrase cultural appropriation does not say much. By this I mean, that there are some supplemental questions that have to be answered first to fully flesh out the definition of this phenomena for audiences. In order to understand cultural appropriation, a few questions need to be answered. What exactly is culture and how should one understand the word appropriation? How does this idea interact with cultural hybridization? What are the parameters of claiming cultural appropriation and how does it differentiate itself from cultural appreciation? The first portion of this chapter already outlined this project's understanding of culture as a concept and the parameters of what constitutes a culture and what does not. This next section works toward answering the questions that I outlined above and attempts to cultivate a concrete definition for cultural appropriation that makes sense in regards for this project.

¹³ Oluo, Ijeoma. 2018. *So You Want to Talk About Race* First ed. New York, NY: Seal Press.

As I noted in my analysis of culture as a concept, understandings of culture vary from text to text, as scholars focus on different aspects of culture be it traditions, world meaning, symbols, and so on. For the most part, unlike culture, definitions of cultural appropriation (that argue it is a negative phenomena) tend to be rather similar from text to text. Academics like Ijeoma Oluo argue that cultural appropriation can be defined as “the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture.”¹⁴ This definition of cultural appropriation is rather broad and shares similarities with many other documented definitions, particularly the terminology used in the definition. Frequently, in definitions of cultural appropriation one will notice the usage of words like domination and exploitation. If these words themselves are not explicitly used, one should expect terms that imply a meaning similar to them. Thus, cultural appropriation takes on a negative connotation hinting at a complicated power imbalance between the cultures involved.

R.A Rogers, fleshes out the ways that cultural appropriation can happen while still alluding to the unofficial consensus of what cultural appropriation is. His essay compiles the ways that various authors have defined cultural appropriation in their writings. Rogers argues that cultural appropriation can be broken down into 4 different categories. These categories are as followed: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturation. He goes on to define each of these as:

1. Cultural exchange: the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres, and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of power.
2. Cultural dominance: the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been

¹⁴ IBID. pg 163

imposed onto the subordinated culture, including appropriations that enact resistance.

3. Cultural exploitation: the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation.

4. Transculturation: cultural elements created from and/or by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic, for example, multiple cultural appropriations structured in the dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism creating hybrid forms¹⁵

Rogers makes a persuasive argument for the most part with his assertion that cultural appropriation comes in 4 different flavors. First, Rogers highlights the traditional usage of the appropriation, likening the word to theft.¹⁶ He then goes on to say that his interpretation of appropriation for the essay “do[es] not limit cultural appropriation to instances where those engaged in appropriation do so “to further [their] own ends” or in a way that necessarily serves their own interests.”¹⁷ **12** This acknowledgment speaks to my earlier point about cultural appropriation not always being an intentional phenomena, but within certain paradigms there can be opportunities for it to arise. For example, cultural exchange can fall under the cultural appropriation umbrella because there is potential for unequalness in the exchanges unintentionally because of global powers between countries and groups of people.

¹⁵ Rogers, R.A. “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation” 2006
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/From-Cultural-Exchange-to-Transculturation%3A-A-and-Rogers/795bcb72591f444627acae2e1149e874d28b39d6#citing-papers>

¹⁶ IBID, pg 475

¹⁷ IBID, pg 475

When thinking of the term, one immediately sees Cultural Appropriation as the act of misrepresenting or stealing elements of one culture by another culture. This interpretation of cultural appropriation is clearly evident in Rogers' explanations of cultural exploitation and dominance. I think it is interesting that Rogers includes cultural exchange and transculturation under cultural appropriation because these do not seem like negatives. The term cultural appropriation has a negative connotation while cultural exchange and transculturation do not. Cultural Exchange interestingly is what is desired when different cultures interact. However, it can be a gateway for cultural appropriation to occur if the elements being traded are not of equal value. One could argue that transculturation could be a form of cultural appropriation if the new hybrid culture is a product of cultural exploitation or cultural dominance. However, on its own it doesn't seem to fall under the more modernized definition of cultural appropriation. Transculturation seems to line up with understandings of cultural hybridization.

While there is nothing wrong with this approach per say, I find that Rogers could better illustrate his point. He highlights that these are forms of cultural appropriation, but tends to begin sections of his text highlighting how his forms of appropriation have room to not be appropriative or exploitative. Rather than 4 types of *cultural appropriation*, I assert that Rogers should rather claim that there are 4 types of cultural *interactions* that serve as a springboard for cultural appropriation to occur. One can understand that cultural appropriation at its very core outlines a form of cultural interaction, where different cultural groups are engaging with one another in some capacity. However, Rogers' essay does shed light on cultural appropriation and how audiences can understand the term for themselves, particularly the fact that cultural appropriation is a process and centered around cultural interactions and engagement. Furthermore, Rogers highlights another common issue with academics discussing cultural

appropriation, particularly those who argue that cultural appropriation is not necessarily a negative phenomenon.

For scholars like John McWhorter, cultural appropriation is not only inevitable, but due to being in a more interconnected world the term is rendered pointless. Whorter goes on to argue that people should be appreciative of having their cultures celebrated and acknowledged, particularly in cases of cultural appropriation. While I do to some extent agree with Whorter such as when he claims that cultures should be celebrated and acknowledged, I believe that Whorter and others like him conflate the ideas of cultural appropriation with cultural appreciation. Cultural appropriation outlines a negative form of cultural interaction hence the usage of the word appropriation. As Rogers has already noted, appropriation specifically denotes a form of theft, which means taken without permission and thus it strikes me as odd that scholars like McWhorter insist that cultural appropriation is not bad and should be celebrated. McWhorter notes that “cultural borrowing and cross-fertilization is a generally positive thing and is something which is usually done out of admiration, and with no intent to harm, the cultures being imitated.”¹⁸ However, this sentence ignores that people find cultural appropriation an issue due to *how* the culture is being used and represented after it is taken.

Now that we have a better understanding of what cultural appropriation is, reasons for why the concept faces so much backlash can be discerned. People object to Cultural Appropriation on the basis of ethics and the potential danger it poses for minority groups. When working to understand cultural appropriation, it is deemed as controversial because it summarizes how elements of underrepresented communities are stolen and/or misrepresented by members outside that culture. As Oluo notes, “usually just attractive bits and pieces are taken

¹⁸ McWhorter, John, “You Can’t Steal A Culture: In Defense of Cultural Appropriation” <https://www.thedailybeast.com/you-cant-steal-a-culture-in-defense-of-cultural-appropriation> Accessed May 5, 2021

and used by the dominant culture.”¹⁹ In addition, the ones doing the stealing are those of a “higher status” or dominant culture. The terms higher status and dominant culture serve to define Understanding this, one can view cultural appropriation as a form of colonialism, where a dominant culture assumes authority of elements in a culture. This colonialism can be exhibited as creating new meanings for elements of cultures that already have an established meaning. As I have already mentioned, cultural appropriation can be problematic due to the fact that there is a commodification aspect where culture can unknowingly become a product that is available to buy and sell.

This assumption of authority can be dangerous for minority groups because not only is their culture being taken from them, but these stolen elements are usually used outside of their original purposes and devoid of their original meaning. For example, one can think of the adoption of the Native American headdress as an example of such. Within American pop culture it is not impossible to find the Native American headdress used as a form of Halloween costume or used liberally as an icon in sports. The commercialization of the Native American headdress devalues its original usage as an article of clothing given to someone by the community due to them exhibiting traits worthy of leading a tribe and has deep ceremonial significance. The original meaning and significance of the Warbonnet is lost as it has become commercialized as a Halloween costume.

Following the previous example with the Native American headdress, cultural appropriation can have the power of reducing a culture to a singular aspect and removing the complexities of said culture. By donning the warbonnet one can essentially claim to be Native American even though there is so much more to Native American culture. People can now gain access to culture and claim membership to a culture that they would not normally be able to. This

¹⁹ Oluo, Ijeoma. 2018. *So You Want to Talk About Race* First ed. New York, NY: Seal Press.

is even dangerous when one realizes that Native American culture can differ from tribe to tribe and this difference is glossed over. The apparent ease that one can become the “Native American” perhaps suggests that culture in general is something that can be worn and discarded at leisure. This last idea is something that is incredibly important to this project as I articulate how K-Pop engages in cultural appropriation when it comes to black Hip-Hop culture.

The discussion surrounding cultural appropriation is extremely important because without being checked it can be a modern form of colonialism and imperialism. This can spell disaster for minority groups whose cultures are already devalued in comparison to a dominant culture. Culture is tied to the history of a group of people so when these cultures face extinction so does the history of these people as they are absorbed into an alternate culture and redefined. Through this history can be rewritten often times in a way that affects the oppressor.

Discussing cultural appropriation is also necessary because the definition is something that is still blurry and can be hard to distinguish from cultural appreciation. As the world continues to become more globalized, it is important to highlight the ways in which countries can inadvertently exert their influence and also perpetuate negative stereotypes of groups of people. Globalization in and of itself is not a bad thing, but the ramifications of cultural appropriation can turn globalization into something that aids one side (the wealthier, richer, dominant culture) and leaves others in an unfair position. More importantly, distinguishing between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation is necessary because oftentimes people believe that they are engaging in cultural appreciation when in reality they are really engaging in cultural appropriation. Understanding the difference between the two in a more globalized world is necessary to prevent upsetting potential consumers. This is especially important for companies that specialize in producing and distributing K-Pop music as fans, particularly black fans, are less

likely to want to consume media that routinely uses their culture as an accessory. Furthermore, as these companies attempt to establish themselves outside of Asia and in places like America, it is possible that can turn potential consumers away because of their insensitivity as to how they are representing cultures not Korean.

Chapter 2: Hip-Hop and K-Pop, a History

Hip-Hop Music History

This section deals heavily with understanding the historical context surrounding the creation and rise of Hip-Hop and Korean Pop Music. Furthermore, as each genre's history is outlined, moments of intersection between the two can be observed, particularly how elements of Hip-Hop arose in Korea and became a mainstay of the genre. Furthermore, through the outlining of each genre's history, one can see the rise to prominence of Korean Pop Music's outside of Korea.

The origin of Hip-Hop as a music genre is a hotly debated topic. Typically, Hip-Hop is understood to have emerged in the 1960's and 70's and is credited as a movement created by inner-city youth in New York City, specifically the Bronx. When discussing Hip-hop, the term can serve as an umbrella phrase that highlights a variety of different forms and time periods of rap music, but also details a culture both created by disenfranchised black and brown youth. For this section of the project, Hip-Hop will mostly refer to the musical aspect, with brief mentions to other elements like fashion and visual art. This section strives to highlight the growth of Hip-Hop music, and by extension the culture, from the South Bronx to outside America to places like South Korea.

An easy way to understand the way in which Hip-Hop music originated is to note the multiple “eras” of Hip-Hop, each era denoting the evolution of rap music throughout the later half of the 20th century. The early years of Hip-Hop, when it was first being formed, have been often attributed to the house and block parties in the South Bronx, particularly ones thrown by DJ Kool Herc. At these parties there would be a DJ, who readily provided music from existing black created genres like soul, funk, and Caribbean music like Jamaican dub. Eventually, DJ’s learned to manipulate these sounds on their turntables to produce what would become “breaking” or “scratching” and laid the foundational framework for Hip-Hop music as a new genre. Additionally, at these parties were “MC’s”, who hyped up and interacted with the audience. This involved wordplay, call and response, and basic rapping originally done without a beat and then progressed so that the rapping was done over a beat. Here we can see that Hip-Hop music as a genre sees itself combining existing music genres like soul, funk, and music from the Caribbean with traditions stemming from older mainland African modes of oral communication and storytelling, especially when it comes to rapping.

These parties saw the appearance of street gangs who engaged in graffitiing, dance battles, and so on with the intention of proving themselves superior to other street gangs. However, as many authors have noted, these parties and the elements of Hip-Hop like break dancing²⁰, graffiti, and rapping served as a positive entity to ensure that the youth of the time remained safe. By interacting with these parties, youth were able to find new outlets for their anger through dance and rap, and remained out of trouble with law enforcement and from dying in gang violence in the turbulent environment of the South Bronx.²¹ MC’s took advantage of this

²⁰ an energetic style of dance typically performed to hip-hop music, characterized by stylized footwork and acrobatic or athletic movements. It originated among African-Americans and Latinos in New York City during the 1970s.

²¹ Chang, Jeff. 2006. *Total Chaos : The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*. African American Music Reference. New York: BasicCivitas Books. INSERT-MISSING-URL.

as they created groups to teach people break dancing and such. Overtime, these house parties expanded beyond crowded apartments and moved to more outside venues like parks. This movement to the outdoor sphere helped Hip-Hop become a more mainstream genre spreading from the Bronx to the other boroughs in New York City.

The first era of Hip-Hop (1979-1983), officially known as Old School Hip-Hop, saw the rise of Hip-Hop move from only live performances during house and block parties to a more recorded medium. The song most often credited as being the first recorded Hip-Hop song is Rapper's Delight by SugarHill. Furthermore, with this song Hip-Hop music transcended the "ghettos of New York"²² to different audiences where people in different boroughs and even other countries could listen to it. In a limited capacity Hip-Hop music was now accessible to other communities besides those living in the Bronx. However, it should be noted that the music was still being predominantly made in the Bronx, New York though. Hip hop music in this era was heavily influenced by disco in comparison to the funk elements that permeated early rap. Also, during this time Hip-Hop saw the rise of alternate subgenres as new technologies allowed for the creation of more diverse sounds and lyrical content. Particularly, the genre of "political/conscious rap" gained more notoriety during this period where rappers would discuss socio-economic issues, racial disadvantages, and their lives in America as black people. Overlapping with this genre was "gangsta rap" which discussed similar themes as "conscious rap" while highlighting the violent nature of urban life especially in areas like the South Bronx. Arguably, conscious rap and gangsta rap has influenced almost all other forms of rap, encouraging people to make music about their realities whatever that looked like for them. Thus, this acknowledgment shows that Hip-Hop and rap operated as a way for people to express themselves and their circumstances, a trend that continues even into contemporary times.

²² IBID, pg 137

The second era of Hip-Hop (1983-1986), known as New School Hip-Hop, differentiated itself from Old School Hip-Hop by using elements of rock music in its musical stylings and the continued development of Hip-Hop subgenres like gangsta-rap and political/conscious rap. Music in this era is noted as being “notable for taunts and boasts about rapping, and socio-political commentary, both delivered in an aggressive, self-assertive style.”²³ At the same time, groups like Native Tongues took an alternate approach to Hip-Hop, giving their music a playful and energetic edge while paying homage to the African roots that laced the origins of Hip-hop music (and culture). This harkening back to the African roots and general attention to the traditions that gave birth to Hip-Hop is an idea that follows through in future eras of Hip-Hop music and culture. Another important feature of this era of Hip-Hop was the focus on music albums, compilations of music by specific artists. While seemingly a trivial facet of the era, the focus on music albums is noteworthy because the compiling of rap music meant that not only were listeners able to hear more music, but the music itself could be distributed easily to larger masses of people and therefore more and more people could engage with Hip-Hop. As Hip-Hop moved into its Golden Age, this facet is important to keep in mind.

The Golden Age of Hip-hop (1986-1997), and the third era of Hip-Hop, is arguably one of the most redefining eras and marks a pivotal change in the nature of the Hip-Hop genre. Music from this era is highly acclaimed and many held the music in high esteem noting that “what made the era they inaugurated worthy of the term golden was the sheer number of stylistic innovations that came into existence... in these golden years, a critical mass of mic prodigies were literally creating themselves and their art form at the same time”²⁴. A valid explanation for this may be due to the fact the range of Hip-Hop expanded outside the New York metropolitan

²³ IBID, pg 137

²⁴ IBID, pg 345

area and many black youths in areas like Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles had begun to dabble in Hip-Hop, adding their creativity, voices, and reality to the mix. Thus the genre of “conscious/political rap” and gangsta rap gained even more popularity and continued to flourish, arguably becoming the face of the Hip-Hop genre. This period in Hip-Hop history is also well known for its focus on Afro-centricism and black nationalism. At the same time due to the innovation, Hip-Hop found itself gaining commercial success, particularly the works of MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice. This allowed Hip-Hop to become incredibly successful and subgenres like gangsta rap sold extremely well. The success of Hip-Hop continued to permeate countries around the world like it had before in earlier eras, however the effect had become even more prominent. Hip-Hop during this time is noted to have become a voice for many disadvantaged youth and a form of social rebellion particularly in countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and South Korea, the latter of which is the focus of the project.

At the same time, the cultural aspect of Hip-Hop continued to grow and flourish as the music of Hip-Hop began to spread its wings and go to other places. This is understandable seeing as Hip-Hop’s music was reaching more and more audiences. As this occurred this allowed different groups of black youth to discuss their reality through rap and add more nuance to the black experience.

Korean Pop Music

A variety of academic works and sources have noted that Korean Pop Music has been heavily influenced by foreign countries and their music styles.²⁵ This is no doubt due to the

²⁵ Kim, Yoon-mi, and Haeoe Hongbowön (Korea). 2011. *K-Pop : A New Force in Pop Music*. Korean Culture, No. 2. Korea: Korean Culture and Information Service.

rather heavy presence of foreign powers within Korea, throughout the 20th century.²⁶ As I noted earlier in the project, Korean Pop Music typically refers to the popular music of South Korea and the country most people think of when the phrase K-Pop is used. Despite this fact, when discussing the history of K-Pop, it is important to acknowledge that the roots of the music genre stretch back to a time before the creation of South Korea as a sovereign nation. Prior to the two nations of North and South Korea the two were unified as a single nation simply acknowledged as Korea, and the complicated relationships between Korea (and the successive nations of North and South Korea) and foreign powers, especially Japan is something that persists even in contemporary history.

Korean Pop Music started out as simply foreign melodies sung with Korean lyrics. These melodies typically came from popular American and British folk music introduced to South Korea by Christian missionaries. Known as “Changga”, these songs were some of the primary sources of music and entertainment. However, these “Changga” doubled as important symbols of resistance and beacons of hope for the Korean population, especially as Japan began to increasingly assume control of Korea through colonization efforts in the early 20th century. Such an example of this was “Huimangga (Song of Hope)”, utilized in activism efforts, particularly the March 1st Movement, a protest calling for the release of Korean citizens from Japanese colonial rule. “Huimangaa (Song of Hope)” was a Japanese song reworked for Korean audiences, but prior to that was an American song reworked from an original British folk song.

Coming from these “Changgas” was the first discernable pop album in Korea that followed the similar structure to the “Changgas”, utilizing existing foreign melodies, but with Korean lyrics. In this case, the foreign melody came from Japan. “As noted in academic data, the

²⁶ Gardner, Hyniea. 2019. The Impact of African-American Musicianship on South Korean Popular Music: Adoption, Appropriation, Hybridization, Integration, or Other?. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.

first Korean pop album was Yi Pungjin Sewol (This Tumultuous Time), released in 1925 by Park Chae-seon and Lee Ryu-saek.²⁷ This album was composed of translated versions of existing Japanese pop songs. However, it must be noted that during the time period when Yi Pungjin Sewol (This Tumultuous Time) was released, Korea had begun the work to transition from using the foreign melodies from existing songs overlaid with Korean lyrics to producing songs with original melodies. An early example of an original Korean made song was “Nakhwayusu (Fallen Blossoms on Running Water),” recorded by Lee Jeong-suk in 1929. Similarly, during this time period the rise of “Trot” became more well-known and popular. Songs under this category were quite similar to the Japanese genre known as “Enka”.

After freeing themselves from Japanese imperial rule and engaging in the Korean War, the newly formed South Korea could further explore music, culture, and their understanding of their society. The music created during this period of time (1950’s) was heavily influenced by Western sounds particularly boy groups like the Beatles, leading to the creation of Add 4. Add 4 was a South Korean boy group, engaging in “group sound”, as South Koreans referred to it. The group was responsible for helping popularize the rock sound with their album, “Bitsogui Yeoin (The Woman in the Rain)”. Rock music was rather common in Japan at that time, partially inspired by the Beatles as well and Japan even had their own version of “group sound”. This period saw the coexisting of multiple genres in Korean music, specifically rock and trot music.

As time went on, South Korea saw the creation and rise of a South Korean “youth culture”, as youth and older generations began to disagree about South Korean pop culture. The youth of South Korea in the 1970’s had vastly different interests and a desire to live their lives differently than the older generation had. Sources note that this is likely due to the circumstances that each generation grew up in. The youth of the 1970’s were born when the United States

²⁷ IBID, pg 45

occupied South Korea and influenced their pop culture. In fact, America continued to influence Korean pop culture as Korean youth looked to America to inform their lifestyles and interests. In contrast, the older generation had lived during a period of Japanese colonization and were used to the “Changgas”, trot, and older forms of music. The youth began to rebel embracing folk music and hippie styles of dress (i.e long hair, jeans), music, and ideals as a statement against the older generation. Notably, when South Korea engaged itself in the Vietnam War the adoption of folk music and ideals from “hippie” culture (i.e love and peace) and the youth used folk music as a form of protest. What is very important about acknowledging the rise of youth culture and their interest in the United States is that this interest laid the groundwork for the rise and popularity of modern Korean Pop Music. Seeing the youth as very receptive to new music, especially sounds originating from America demonstrated to music corporations that the youth were a profitable demographic and who they should aim their endeavors toward.

The cross section between Korean Pop Music and Hip-Hop music and culture can be understood to have happened in the 1990’s. As I mentioned earlier in the project, the 1990’s were considered the “Golden Age of Hip-Hop” where Hip-Hop managed to achieve critical success and became a global phenomenon. Particularly, the group act Seo Taiji & Boys, were the first to incorporate rap into their stage performances where they critiqued aspects of South Korean society. Furthermore, the group’s style of dress using baggy jeans and T-shirts with labels on them was very appealing to teenagers at the time. As Journalist and promoter Kim contends “fashion was the first element of hip hop culture to reach Korea. Growing up in Seoul in the late 1990s, he recalls youth wearing the hip hop bricolage of Nike shoes and baggy jeans. This aligns

with the Japanese scene where only a small number of youths wearing hip hop fashion actually consumed the music (Condry, 2006).”²⁸

Just like other forms of music that penetrated South Korean society, rap music, or rather rap dance, (as it was called) became popular with the youth. The usage of Hip-Hop especially rap and fashion fundamentally changed Korean Pop Music into what most people know it as today. Essentially, the success of Seo Taiji & Boys gave birth to the creation of “idols” and modern K-Pop. It also introduced the idea that companies should focus on teenagers as the primary demographic for sales and subsequently provides an explanation for the business models that entertainment companies like SM, JYP, and YG have in place in relation to prepping idols for their debut. Particularly, due to the influence of Hip-Hop, or rather Taiji and the Boys, idol groups will now tend to have someone who raps as a part of a group line-up and fashion trends and such were primarily gained from watching American media. From this we can see that K-Pop has never been a “purely” Korean phenomenon, taking inspiration from other sounds as they entered Korea. This idea is important to keep in mind as work to understand appropriation.

Chapter 3: Hip-Hop Appropriation in Kpop

When it comes to contemporary K-Pop, many scholars have noted, or at least implied that modern Korean Pop Music would be virtually non-existent without the influences from black culture, specifically black Hip-Hop culture, an intersection I outlined in the previous chapter of this essay. Thus, the influences from that intersection that occurred primarily in the 1990’s can still be seen in modern Korean Pop Music and is cause for ire amongst some K-Pop fans today.

²⁸ Gardner, Hyniea. 2019. The Impact of African-American Musicianship on South Korean Popular Music: Adoption, Appropriation, Hybridization, Integration, or Other?. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.

Cultural appropriation in K-Pop, especially of Hip-Hop culture, has been a long standing issue and topic of discussion within the genre especially in recent years, as more and more people have begun to interact with the multi-dimensional genre. As it spread beyond the borders of South Korea, this has allowed people to notice the appeal of the genre while at the same time noticing the flaws of it, particularly its penchant for utilizing cultures not inherently Korean.

This section of my project will work to understand how K-Pop appropriates black Hip-Hop culture specifically. By doing so, one will realize which aspects of K-Pop (i.e the music, visual aesthetics, and so on) this appropriation is most salient in and who should be held responsible for this appropriation. Furthermore, I will make the distinction of why the usage of Hip-Hop culture in K-Pop is exploitative rather than appreciative, utilizing the theories of culture hybridization and glocalization I referenced before. I will outline these aspects of Hip-Hop while also providing historical context and the meanings given to these objects as cultural symbols by members of the Hip-hop community. Additionally, this section will outline the racial dynamics between Korean people and people of the African diaspora as a way to further underpin how their usage of Hip-Hop culture can come across as appropriative. Lastly, this section will outline some implications that the appropriation of Hip-Hop culture has implied and the larger meaning that can be taken from that for the general South Korean public.

Conceptual K-Pop

To begin my analysis, it is important to provide a structure and explain how K-Pop companies tend to operate when creating, distributing, and marketing their music for consumers. A massive selling point of K-Pop is the conceptual nature of the genre, a concept I mentioned briefly at the beginning of my project. When I say conceptual nature, I mean that companies

typically have their girl and boy groups represent some type of overall theme that is reflected in how their music sounds and the way that they style their artists. Typically, K-Pop fans will refer to these as K-Pop concepts, and these concepts serve as a way for the group to have some form of identity and to be identifiable and hopefully recognizable to the general public. Some examples of these group concepts are “girl crush”, “teen crush”, “space”, “superheroes”, and so on. Adding to that, whenever a group has a “comeback” (where the group will release new music), these comebacks have their own concepts, or themes. More often than not, these “comeback” concepts match the group’s overall concept, so if a group’s concept is “girl crush” expect their “comeback” theme to be “girl crush” as well. Occasionally, some groups have a rather broad group concept, allowing their comeback concepts to span a wider range of themes. One such case of the broad group concept is NCT Dream, a 7 member boy group under SM Entertainment. Their group concept is arguably “youth”, a rather vague term that has a multitude of meanings. As such the music they have released has been incredibly versatile, speaking to themes of childlike innocence, childhood crushes, teenage independence and rebellion, and so on.

An important part of an idol’s job is to adhere to their group’s overall concept and/or the concept of that particular comeback. Idols are often judged on whether they can embody a concept and how *well* they embody said concept, with the best of them being applauded for their versatility in their stage performances. For many consumers of K-Pop, there is a joy in seeing who excels at embodying a concept during live stages and performances, particularly how they manage to adapt their style of dancing, singing, or rapping to fit the theme. As scholars have noted, “In order to meet the demands of local and global K-pop fans and to ensure their own relative longevity within the industry, idols must drastically and continuously recreate their

presentation, often embodying various personae throughout their careers.”²⁹ This quote highlights an important facet of being a K-Pop idol and how their visibility in the industry is directly connected to how well they can perform the group’s concept. Those who are able to be adaptable and/or match the concept of the group perfectly tend to be featured rather heavily in music videos, be the focal point of the “comeback”, and are oftentimes the focal point of the group as a whole. With this comes the opportunity for sponsorships, personal side gigs, and overall more notoriety and visibility to fans and the South Korean populous.

Popular concepts in K-Pop that groups tend to do, center themselves around ideas of toughness and masculinity, and by extension a lack of “traditionally femininity”. As K-Pop fans on Reddit have argued, concepts surrounding masculinity, toughness, and generally more adult themes are much more popular than concepts that reflect youth, cuteness, and energy.³⁰ This Reddit thread highlights an important fact of K-Pop noting that groups who tend to pursue a more “dark” concept versus a brighter concept tend to find more commercial success especially in this day and age. As a Redditor outlines “A recent example of this is Verivery, who started out with a cute concept and were only met with declining sales and little to no interest or hype until they changed to a more mature concept and to a lesser extent, golden child, though they were always doing pretty good for a group at their level.”³¹ Similarly, with groups like CLC this fact holds true as well. When they switched into a mature concept with their song, “Black Dress” they saw album sales rise, a trend that continued with their later releases which had the same concept as “Black Dress”. Furthermore, the same Redditor notes that groups who switch sounds

²⁹ Garza, Joyhanna Yoo. 2021. “Where All My Bad Girls at?: Cosmopolitan Femininity through Racialised Appropriations in K-Pop”. *Gender and Language* 15 (1):11–41. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.18565>.

³⁰ Atzverse “Boy groups need to do more ‘fresh/cute/bubblegum’ concepts r/unpopulararkpopopinions, Reddit, May 5, 2021 https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopulararkpopopinions/comments/igwu3m/boy_groups_need_to_do_more_freshcutebubblegum/g2wifep/

³¹ IBID

and embrace a brighter concept for a “comeback” are often met with criticism. This was the case with BTS, arguably the most renowned K-Pop boy group of this current time period. During their promotions for “DNA”, they were met with dissatisfaction from long time fans who voiced that they felt the song was a generic pop song with zero substance and a rather unusual inclusion to BTS’ more lore heavy discography. However, such claims were less apparent with their next release, “Fake Love”, which was “darker in nature.

Essentially, companies and the groups tend to strive for a sound and imagery that strays away from a brighter, upbeat region preferring aesthetics that for a lack of a better term are “darker”. Pursuing these types of concepts are more profitable for K-Pop companies, who are businesses first and members of the entertainment industry second. Furthermore, as I noted in the culture of K-Pop, the fan response to these tougher, more mature concepts has been overwhelmingly positive. Thus companies are more inclined to pursue these types of concepts during “comebacks” in order to make their group’s more popular and bring in more revenue. When using the term darker, I simply mean that the groups and the teams creating their music will include more raps in the song, the music videos will have low lighting to mimic night time, the settings will tend to feature urban environments or minimalist sets and so on. And most importantly, the group’s styling (i.e the way they are dressed and the accessories they use) will tend to include things like predominantly black outfits (black explicitly referring to the color black and not the race black), leather, hairstyles like cornrows, items like durags, bucket hats, and gold jewelry.

As I noted above the most important and highly successful method of establishing the concept and helping the idols relay this concept to fans is through the cultivation of visual aesthetics in relation to the theme of their comeback. When one thinks of K-Pop, immediately

some of the first thoughts that come to mind surround visuals. Visuals can range from things like music videos, photoshoots for albums, and clothing styles meant for live performances. For this project, I assert that the visual aspects, especially the styling (hairstyles, clothing, and accessories) of K-Pop idols is where one can most obviously spot the appropriation of Hip-Hop culture. Thus by extension, I also argue that the very conceptual nature of K-Pop opens the door for appropriation to occur and this is reflected in the way that companies use fashion to style their idols as the idols themselves showcase the concept for their latest batch of music. In this particular case, I argue that K-Pop has a tendency to appropriate fashion heavily associated and codified by black artists in the Hip-Hop community. When using the word fashion, the word can refer to items such as clothing, clothing brands, and accessories like gold chains and mouth grills. Connected to that, I would also like to add that I consider hairstyles and items related to hair like durags a part of the Hip-Hop fashion realm. The hairstyle cornrows and the hair item, the durag, as the most salient objects of appropriation in my personal opinion, serve a focal point for this section of the project.

History of Cornrows and Durags

The durag is seen as a symbol of black Hip-Hop culture. Like cornrows, the durag has not always been accredited as a fashion symbol in Hip-hop culture, but has been something that black men and women have worn throughout history. Not much scholarship has been done surrounding the durag as an object, but what little information that has been offered suggests that the durag has primarily been used for practical purposes in keeping hair neat and tidy. It wasn't until the 1960's and 70's that the durag gained a symbolic status in Hip-hop culture. As Hip-Hop culture started being formed as an extension of the Black Power Movements of the 50's and 60's

the durag was worn more often and in more of the outside sphere.³² Hip-hop artists like Jay-Z and Nelly are credited with helping the popularity of the durag as a fashion statement trend during the 90's when Hip-Hop became more well known.

Cornrows have an interesting place in Hip-Hop culture. Typically, many would not immediately cite the hairstyle as an element of fashion within Hip-Hop. This may be because when discussing fashion in Hip-Hop many immediately default to things like bucket hats, track suits, and so on. Furthermore, it could be because the hairstyle was not intentionally worn by Hip-Hop artists as a symbol of the genre, but rather just a symptom of the fact that many artists in the Hip-Hop genre were black. Through outlining the history of cornrows I will show why I consider cornrows a part of Hip-Hop culture. However, as some scholars have noted the hairstyle has been donned by rappers like Tupac and Snoop Dog, with the latter even referring to the style as “strictly for [his niggas]”³³. Who “his niggas” are is believed to be anyone black, especially black men who participated in Hip-Hop and understood the struggle of being black in America.

The style has roots from back in Africa, eventually making its way across the sea when African slaves were brought to America, and then continued as a form of knowledge passed down through the generations. For slaves on the plantations, the braiding of hair served as a form of rebellion, being one of the few things they could control about their appearances. The cornrows were oftentimes done in place of shaving their hair and were a way to subtly maintain cultural ties in an environment that sought to destroy that. At the same time the hairstyle operated as a way to pass secret codes to one another. These codes related primarily to escaping

³² Andrews, David, and Michael Silk. 2010. “Basketball's Ghetto-centric Logic.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (11): 1626–44.

³³ Shen, Ann “Nevertheless, She Wore It: 50 Iconic Fashion Moments” 2020

plantations, showing escape routes that individuals could use when making their escape. As it would be foolish and very dangerous to openly discuss escape routes verbally, slaves used their hair as a form of communicator. While the style no longer holds this specific purpose, the style for individuals who engage in Hip-Hop culture took on a different meaning in this context.

Cornrows has long been a part of Hip-Hop culture and overall black culture as a whole, being really prevalent in the Hip-Hop scene especially during the 1990's. As noted previously, the hairstyle has become symbolic in Hip-Hop culture. As was the case with a lot of fashion trends in Hip-Hop, cornrows started out as a simple, practical part of reality for black men. By this I mean that cornrows were not always a part of fashion or explicitly related to Hip-Hop culture, and could be argued as simply a symptom of the situation that black men found themselves in. "Trends such as baggy jeans and shoe laces were inspired by how young black inner-city males would wear their clothing after being released from jail. In jail, men would often be given the wrong size clothing, shoes with no laces, and no belt because it could be used as a weapon. As a result, convicts returning to their neighbourhoods would become accustomed to clothing in this manner."³⁴ As this quote highlights, trends in Hip-Hop did not intentionally start as symbols of Hip-hop, but were rather real life situations that later became symbolic within the genre. The same can be said for cornrows as a style within Hip-Hop.

For men in particular, cornrows were the dominant style they wore their hairs during their stay at the penitentiary and many adopted the style as a part of their everyday wardrobe after being released from prison. Cornrows as a hairstyle served a practical purpose, keeping hair out of their faces as it grew, as they did not have immediate access to barbers to cut it. As many

³⁴ Garza, Joyhanna Yoo. 2021. "Where All My Bad Girls at?": Cosmopolitan Femininity through Racialised Appropriations in K-Pop". *Gender and Language* 15 (1):11–41. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.18565>.

sources would note, black men have the highest rate of going to prison across the various racial and gender demographics in America. I noted previously, black and brown communities like the South Bronx were continuously and rather disproportionately policed and subject to monitoring as supposed sites of crime and danger. Thus as many men went in and out of prison, the hairstyle of cornrows thus began its relationship with “the ghettos across America” and a familiar hairstyle many were used to seeing.

Many of the men who went to prison like Snoop Dogg actively engaged in the Hip-hop genre as rappers. Particularly, these men engaged with the gangsta rap genre of Hip-Hop. As these men rapped about their experiences as black men fighting to survive in harsh communities, their experiences in prison, and their experiences engaging with the law, they donned cornrows as a symbol of that struggle. Thus the hairstyle cornrows could be seen as an emblem of the thug life and could be seen as a visual representation of the ‘thug life personified.’³⁵ As I mentioned before in my cultural section of this essay, symbols in culture operate as a way to denote belonging to a specific group and a way to establish community and understandings with people who have been through similar experiences. The cornrows serve as a physical manifestation of the social bonds that unite people in the Hip-Hop community together. Arguably, the usage of cornrows not only demonstrates an inclusion to the gangster community, but also highlights an ability to survive and keep thriving in a society that continuously tries to tear one down. Through this, cornrows can be understood to be an emblem achievement while also acting as reminders of history, and remembering where “one came from”.³⁶ The usage of hairstyles like cornrows serves as a way to demonstrate one’s social positioning and can serve as a way to provide a manual for others in that culture on how to survive.

³⁵ Andrews, David, and Michael Silk. 2010. “Basketball's Ghetto-centric Logic.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (11): 1626–44.

³⁶ IBID, pg 23

Appropriation of Cornrows and Durags

As noted earlier in my project, various idols have utilized hairstyles like cornrows and hair items like the durag in their performance stages like Bang Chan from Stray Kidz, Kim Jong-in of EXO (also known professionally as Kai), and Zhong Chenle from NCT Dream. Additionally, one can see female K-Pop idols like Hyuna and BLACKPINK use hairstyles like cornrows in their stage stylings. However, these few individuals named here are not the only people who have donned this hairstyle or used the durag, but are some of the immediate few that many K-Pop listeners can name if asked about cornrows in K-Pop. Hairstyles and fashion in general are meant to serve as an immediate introduction to a group's concept. It is one of the first things that people can process when they are introduced to various K-Pop groups and the styling can give hints to what their music will sound like and what their overall concept will be. Thus when groups don the durag and/or wear cornrows the insinuation is that they will be doing a tougher, more mature type of "comeback".

When it comes to cornrows and Hip-Hop culture in general, their usage in K-Pop is deemed to be exploitative and appropriative because of the fact that they are simply used to push the concept of the group or a comeback without doing much to highlight the social factors that led to their creation and importance as cultural symbols. As I outlined previously one can understand that cornrows in Hip-Hop culture hold a lot of meaning for members of the community. When looking at cornrows, the usage of them in Hip-Hop is a symbol of a struggle that many Black men in 90's America were facing at the time. However, when looking at how K-Pop utilizes cornrows and the durag this would not come across at all. For K-Pop companies, when they want their groups to have a tougher concept or to be seen as more aggressive and

masculine, cornrows and durags will often appear. In some ways, K-Pop companies understand that Hip-hop and the fashion within it are meant to be gritty and rough around the edges (or else they wouldn't bother using it to highlight these tougher concepts.) Similarly, there is a reliance on the swagger or rather attempt to recreate the sense of swagger that many Hip-Hop artists have when it comes to their craft to further underpin the more aggressive, self assured style they want their group to show to audiences. The usage of cornrows and the durag is meant to simulate the swagger that Hip-Hop artists themselves radiate in their music performances. We can define swagger as the “comprehensive, boastful, stylistically arrogant, and somewhat effortless presentation of self in the public sphere.”³⁷ However, it seems that companies who produce K-Pop content do not understand why this is the case or the deeper history that outlines fashion popular in Hip-Hop particularly cornrows.

For these companies, cornrows and durags are simply seen as “cool” or “swag” and thus fit into the narratives that they want their groups to have. Korean journalist Kang expands on this point highlighting “Korean rappers copy black rappers and black style” because “black rappers are cool.” This suggests that Koreans adopt Black culture to follow current trends, mirroring the Japanese hip hop scene.”³⁸ Similarly, the same article goes on to quote the conversations between the author of the article and his Korean friends. ““We are kind of a hip hop guy” but we “never knew what hip hop was, so we tried to relate " by wearing the fashion. Kim highlights that few locals understood hip hop culture, and merely copied “hip hop fashion; black fashion.”

³⁹ While these quotes are used in reference to K-Hip Hop, they can be used for analysis in Korean Pop Music. They are important because they note how K-Pop will adopt black Hip-Hop

³⁷ Gardner, Hynia. 2019. The Impact of African-American Musicianship on South Korean Popular Music: Adoption, Appropriation, Hybridization, Integration, or Other?. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.

³⁸ IBID, pg 68

³⁹ IBID, pg 119

culture as a means to keep up with trends. In this case the trends surround what K-Pop fans want to hear and see when they engage with K-Pop: “darker concepts” in their music. In this way, K-Pop companies show a shallowness in working to understand cultures and represent cultures outside their own. Furthermore, this shallowness and lack of effort demonstrates that it is not about authentically representing the Hip-hop culture, but rather seeing how it can help them create more profits. By not understanding the full significance of cornrows and the durag there is a devaluation of them and their meaning. Essentially, based on the current trends at the time K-Pop manages to turn Hip-Hop culture into a form of commodity that can be used and discarded whenever they so desire.

Following this argument, using cornrows and the durag in K-Pop allows for a persona to be created by the artists within K-Pop. By this statement, I argue that through donning the cornrows and/or durag, K-Pop idols attempt to create a false image of themselves that is culturally appropriative. In the previous section of this paper, I outlined the role of an idol in relation to the company. An idol’s role is purely meant to operate as vessels for whatever concept the company has decided that their group will represent overall and for each specific comeback. As I mentioned already, an idol’s worth is oftentimes connected to how well they can embody a concept and make it shine for the audience to enjoy. Arguably, their longevity in the industry is reliant on this particular skill because again this usually means more screen time, center time, and general visibility to consumers. As K-Pop stars engage with Hip-Hop culture and attempt to emulate the more gritty, tougher image that they see within Hip-hop, it can oftentimes come off as inauthentic. As notes,

Within their [Jessi/Jay Park] performance, it did not seem fake or a “front” (i.e. facade) that they were employing to create additional interest in their music videos. Their swagger movements and gestures seemed like natural extensions of their performance personas. However, swagger looked like an ill-fitting coat that was tried on by BLACKPINK and EXO. Their attempts were textbook examples of faux presentation and incorporation. None of the members seem to have an actual understanding or natural acculturation to swagger.⁴⁰

Here it is argued that the attempt at swagger by K-Pop idols can come off as inauthentic and can be purely read as an attempt to match a concept given to them by their company. This can happen perhaps due to the fact that K-Pop idols are not personally invested in Hip-Hop culture a lot of times. This ties back into the lack of knowledge that K-Pop companies tend to lack when cultivating concepts. Due to K-Pop companies and K-Pop idols both lacking knowledge and not understanding Hip Hop culture, Hip-Hop concepts when done in K-Pop can seem extremely watered down and not representative of the culture at all. Furthermore, another complication of this is where K-Pop idols will end up attempting to represent a life and reality that they have no real experience with. “Since idols generally do not craft music meant to represent themselves or their personal experiences, the notion of authenticity is not germane to the genre (Lie 2015). Producers play a much more significant role than the artists in shaping idol performances.”⁴¹ A lot of Hip-Hop speaks to financial struggle, experiences with the law, and so on almost all of which K-Pop idols are surely clueless. It is frankly common knowledge that a majority of K-Pop stars are financially well-off and the cultivation of image by companies prevents many from run-ins with the law. As such, what one is left with is people who are

⁴⁰ IBID, pg 120

⁴¹ Garza, Joyhanna Yoo. 2021. “Where All My Bad Girls at?: Cosmopolitan Femininity through Racialised Appropriations in K-Pop”. *Gender and Language* 15 (1):11–41. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.18565>.

physically decked out in “Hip-Hop gear” like cornrows and such, but very little understanding of how or what Hip-Hop is truly about.

Adding to the complexity surrounding the appropriation of Hip-Hop Culture in K-Pop are the racial dynamics in South Korea between South Koreans and members of the African diaspora. It is no secret that South Korea is a rather homogeneous country, with over 90% of the population claiming Korean descent of some sort. This means that 10% of the population are composed of foreigners not native to South Korea. It is rather hard to assert how many foreigners are of African descent as South Korea lists these foreigners by nationality rather than ethnicity. Typically though, it seems there are not a lot of people who are African or have African ancestry in South Korea based on people’s reports of their stays in Korea.⁴² However, this has not stopped South Koreans from engaging in racist acts toward Africans and people of African descent.

As Ghanaian comedian and singer, Sam Okyere, highlights during his appearance on South Korean entertainment show, *Knowing Bros.*, “People would openly come up to you and say really bad stuff like ‘You black monkey, go back to where you come from.’ And sometimes you go to a place and people don't want to sit next to you. Like, that was heart-breaking.”⁴³ Here Okyere notes with displeasure that when he first came to South Korea as a student to study his experiences were less than ideal. Many others have voiced similar stories about their experiences dealing with racism with South Korean people. In particular, a lot of these stories come from biracial children, who are part Korean and part different ethnicity. For members of this biracial community, living in Korea can be rather difficult for them and for their parents, especially the

⁴² Ivymikey, “Racism in Korea” https://www.reddit.com/r/korea/comments/2e2h6g/racism_in_korea/ Reddit, r/Korea, Accessed May 5, 2020

⁴³ Ing, E. (2013). Hip-Hop street fashion, identity, and cross-Cultural appropriation in the Asian diaspora. *Proceedings of the 56th Annual Meeting of the ISSS - 2012, San Jose, CA, USA*. Retrieved from <https://journals.iss.org/index.php/proceedings56th/article/view/1960>

parent who is not Korean. Many of these biracial children highlighted being treated differently from their peers with one mentioning even being seen as an alien by her peers.⁴⁴

A lot of incidents of racism in South Korea ironically have been done by K-Pop stars. In 2017, K-Pop girl group Mamamoo uploaded a cover of Uptown Funk by Bruno Mars in complete blackface, later taking down the video when fans expressed outrage toward them. In 2018, Wendy of girl group Red Velvet, went viral for her imitation of a stereotypical black woman when asked how black women act. In Wendy's case, she identifies as Canadian, and thus is understood by black to have known better due to growing up outside of South Korea. These acts speak to a larger sense of casual racism that is prevalent in K-Pop. Due to the rather homogenous nature of South Korea, K-Pop idols are sometimes unable to understand how their actions, especially toward black people, can come across as. Thankfully, fans have made it a point to call out idols when they feel like their idols have committed racist actions.

What complicates this is the company's response to these call-outs. Occasionally, idols will issue apologies and other times they will remain silent. Even then these apologies are more often than not generic company issued apologies. These apologies are typically extremely vague and often do not highlight what the idol did wrong or how they will rectify their mistake. This has led to black fans feeling as though they are not well respected as fans because they are not even offered apologies for actions that hurt them. Exacerbating this issue is the acknowledgment that K-Pop has a large debt to black culture, particularly Hip-Hop culture. K-Pop has no issue using cornrows or a durag to push a concept, but refuse to acknowledge how the members of that culture feel. This ignoring of black feelings demonstrates to black fans how blackness is only useful for K-Pop concepts and ideas and ultimately profit, but the actual members of that

⁴⁴ "Racism in Korea" https://www.reddit.com/r/korea/comments/2e2h6g/racism_in_korea/ Reddit, r/Korea, Accessed May 5, 2020

community do not matter. This perhaps raises an interesting question of who the audience of K-Pop is meant to be? If K-Pop sees itself as a global music platform and wants to expand beyond South Korea, it makes one wonder who is this music being produced for if black fan criticisms are not taken seriously.

Conclusion:

As we end off this paper, I would like to reiterate how cultural appropriation of black Hip-Hop culture occurs in Korean Pop Music. As we have seen, K-Pop tends to focus rather strongly on the idea of concepts when creating music for fans to listen to. However, K-Pop has a tendency to utilize the cultures of others when doing so. In particular, this tends to happen with black Hip-Hop culture, especially in regards to fashion. K-Pop's usage of the durag and the hairstyle cornrows demonstrates a few things when companies are coming up with concepts for their groups. Particularly, it shows that K-Pop does not do enough research when it comes to finding ways to enhance their idea of how they want their group to be seen or rather the identity they are trying to establish for them. At the same time, this lack of knowledge shows itself in inauthentic representations of Hip-hop culture, especially when one considers that many K-Pop stars do not have the same experiences that defined the men and women who first engaged with Hip-Hop culture as a form of rebellion. So despite looking the part, many K-Pop are unable to capture the true essence of Hip-Hop in their music. Adding to that, despite frequently using the durag and cornrows to enhance their image, K-Pop has notoriously ignored the complaints of Black fans who are frustrated by K-Pop's misrepresentation of Hip-Hop.

While I argued that this appropriation was accidental throughout my project, perhaps this section will make me reconsider that K-Pop appropriates intentionally and simply does not care.

As I ponder this, I am more likely to argue that when I consider that K-Pop does this with other cultures like Desi culture and such. That was a common theme as I did my research for this project, having to filter through the various forms of appropriation that K-Pop engages in. This realization causes a lot of questions for me. In particular, immediately I wonder if culturally appropriating is worth it? When I ask this question, I am asking if the pros outweigh the cons for K-Pop companies using non-Korean cultures as a way to drum up interest in a group. As I have noticed, fans have spent a lot of time complaining to companies directly about their appropriative acts. Would it just not be easier to simply avoid using other cultures as a concept rather than having to re-edit or cut parts of music videos and address fans with apologies? Perhaps, the pros do outweigh the benefits because groups with loyal fan bases are continuing to do well for the most and despite our gripes black fans still do enjoy K-Pop and seek it out as a form of entertainment. My second question centers around that fact that I just highlighted a moment ago. Why do black fans still look to K-Pop as a form of entertainment despite our ire toward it? Since I can only speak for myself for this, it perhaps has to do with the desensitization I have with blackness being misused and mistreated throughout my life as an American. In America, I am already accustomed to blackness being profitable, especially when it is used by any who is oftentimes not black. At the same time, I have taken breaks from certain groups when I find that their actions are inexcusably racist or show no attempt to rectify their mistakes.

Lastly, I would like to highlight some future research I would like to do in connection with this project. As I continue to think about appropriation of black Hip-hop culture I would love to do interviews with other black fans to understand their experiences with K-Pop. I know a large portion of people who are black and enjoy K-Pop, so their insight could be valuable especially in regards to the last question. I would also like to somehow expand this project so

that I could include other minority races that feel like their culture is misused as a concept fodder in K-Pop. However, a challenge I could experience would be finding a way that fully incorporates these different cultures equally without one overshadowing the other. I also would like to interview some South Korean artists, or citizens as a way to understand how K-Pop has affected their sense of self. Even though I briefly touched on this in my paper it could be a really important and valuable source of insight hearing the opinions of actual Korean people rather than relying on already written texts. I recognize that this could be a bit difficult due to me not knowing South Korean citizens and because of the subject matter. It could be hard to find participants for a project that centers itself around critiquing Korean culture especially as a black outsider. However, I would very much like to attempt.

As I end this paper, I truly wonder if cultural appropriation will ever end. Realistically, the answer is no of course as many scholars like John McWhorter have argued. However, my response to that is to question how we can reach a point where cultures are appreciated and valued for what they are rather than as devices for profit. I think a good start is having K-Pop fans advocate for themselves and continue to call out companies for appropriating cultures, especially black Hip-Hop culture until change is made. Company reception has been rather slow to this, but a few have taken the steps to apologize and re-edit hurtful imagery. I would like to see more companies directly respond to fan complaints, specifically where they outline where they went wrong and acknowledge their role in cultural appropriation. By doing so, I genuinely believe we can come to a place where cultures are appreciated wholeheartedly.

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