

K-Pop Without Koreans: Racial Imagination and Boundary Making in K-Pop

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With K-pop groups beginning to include non-Korean members, K-pop has become increasingly transnational and hybridized. All aspects of K-pop have now transcended Korea's national borders, from production to consumption and from performers' nationalities to their music and fashion styles. There have even been some intriguing experiments in creating K-pop groups composed mainly, or even entirely, of non-Korean/Asian members, such as EXP Edition, CoCo Avenue, and KAACHI. Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, these groups have faced vigorous pushback from K-pop fan communities and have generated heated controversy about the definition of K-pop. In this article, I interrogate the racial politics of K-pop by carefully examining international K-pop fans' reactions to and discourse about these three groups. By examining how fans' online engagement has challenged the conventions of K-pop with non-Asian performers, I advance the discussion of the racial dimension of the genre, which has received little attention in the current Korean Wave scholarship.

Keywords: K-pop, cultural appropriation, hybridity, race, EXP Edition, CoCo Avenue, KAACHI

"Keep Korean things Korean. Period." Thus reads a comment on VICE's—"The World's Most Controversial K-pop Group"—video on its YouTube channel (VICE, 2018). The video is a 30-minute documentary about EXP Edition (hereafter simply "EXP"), the first K-pop group to be formed with no Korean members. K-pop idol groups with one non-Korean member or even a few are not novel; indeed, the recruitment of multinational trainees has been a proven strategy for K-pop entertainment agencies seeking to appeal to various regions within the global market. For instance, the nine members of TWICE include Tzuyu from Taiwan and Mina, Momo, and Sana from Japan. EXO originally comprised two units: EXO-K, targeting mainly Korean audiences, and EXO-M, targeting Chinese audiences, with the inclusion of four Chinese members (three of whom eventually left the group). The list of K-pop groups with non-Korean members is extensive, including Super Junior, 2PM, GOT7, BLACKPINK, (G)I-dle, NCT, and aespa. Notably,

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Date submitted: 8-10-2021

¹ This article was supported by the 2021 Korean Studies Grant Program of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-C-009).

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the non-Koreans in these groups are predominantly of Asian descent, while non-Asian performers, especially those of African descent, have found little success in the K-pop genre.

In this context, the introduction of EXP, a K-pop group composed largely of (White) Americans, roiled K-pop fan communities who perceived the group as a challenge to Korea's "primordial understanding of the relationships between ethnicity, language, and culture production" (Angela, 2017, para. 4). This form of diversity ultimately poses a critical question about what is "Korean" about K-pop. A consideration of the range of possible criteria—geographical location, the language in which the songs are sung, and the members' (and producers') Korean ethnicity or linguistic competence—indicates that the definition is far from clear and has been evolving constantly. The YouTube comment about "keeping Korean things Korean" gets to the heart of the issue, with its implication that (1) fans perceive a boundary separating what is and what is not K-pop, and (2) K-pop is uniquely Korean, and its status as such must be protected and preserved.

In this article, I interrogate the racial politics of K-pop through a careful examination of three groups—EXP, CoCo Avenue, and KAACHI—made up primarily or entirely of non-Asian members. As the foregoing discussion suggests, these groups have faced significant pushback from fan communities and generated heated controversy about how K-pop is defined (Angela, 2017; Tan, 2018). The fans, for the most part, have condemned the groups as examples of cultural appropriation and have refused to consider them as belonging to the genre (Dahir, 2017a). In particular, I analyze the comment sections of each group's official music videos on YouTube, as well as their media discourse in online magazines and newspaper articles, which include interviews with producers and members of the groups, and their comments sections.

The media discourse produced by industry reporters and fans, I argue, creates specific knowledge about what constitutes K-pop. Online spaces serve as sites for ceaseless debate about the meanings and boundaries of the genre. Through my analysis of this discourse, I demonstrate how fans' online engagement, in terms of expressing approval or disapproval of these groups, has challenged the conventions of the genre, revealing the key role of their evolving imagination in defining its boundaries. By examining how these boundaries have been made and re-made in relation to non-Asian performers, I advance the discussion of the racial dimension of the genre, which has received little attention in current Korean Wave scholarship.

Unraveling K-Pop: The "K" and the "Pop"

Today, K-pop is more than just a music genre: it is a style, a cultural commodity, an industry, and even a business model. Because of the increasing popularity of K-pop in global pop music, neither its production nor its consumption remains fundamentally tied to a specific locale or region, as was once the case. Thus, the changing status of K-pop in the global music industry and its shifting scope and boundaries problematize efforts to appreciate its current significance and trajectory. In this part of the discussion, I conceptualize K-pop as a cultural space with boundaries that are being shaped and reshaped by the tension between the local (i.e., "K" as a specific reference to Korea) and the global ("pop" as a global music genre), as well as the intricate interplay between the industry (production) and the audience (consumption; see Anderson, 2020; Fuhr, 2016; G. T. Lee, 2020; Song, 2019).

The etymology of “K-pop” is clear enough: “K” stands for “Korean” and “pop” for “popular music.” However, the meanings of both terms have been changing rapidly in the current era of globalization, making each a significant locus of cultural contestation for fans, music critics, and members of the music industry. A consideration of the meaning of the hyphen in “K-pop,” which mediates the relationship—and tension—between the “K” and the “pop,” can therefore facilitate a critical understanding of the genre. Along these lines, both Fuhr (2016), an ethnomusicologist, and G. T. Lee (2020), a media/cultural studies scholar, have conceptualized K-pop as a genre subject to constant reshaping as a result of competitive interactions between the local and the global. Thus, the former specifically insists that K-pop retains an “inherent tension between the global imaginary it depicts and issues of national identity that were underlying, intersecting, and conflicting with it” (Fuhr, 2016, p. 59), and the latter presents multiple dimensions and cases in which the “K,” as a locus of Korea’s national specificity, and the “pop,” as a globally popular music genre, simultaneously conflict and fuse (G. T. Lee, 2020).

The term “K-pop,” as it is used today, refers primarily to the idol pop that emerged in the late 1990s. The fact that the genre has little to do with traditional Korean cultural heritage (Lie, 2015) does not mean that it is devoid of Korean specificity (Kim, Kuroda, & Shao, 2018). It is no secret that K-pop has been heavily influenced by Western pop in terms of its sound and style, being defined less by sound and more by non-musical features, such as intensive training and styles of production and marketing (alapadma2 et al., 2020; Tan, 2018). Furthermore, the term “K-pop” originated outside Korea to describe a particular type of Korean popular music in the 1990s (see Kim, 2018) and, as such, reflects the desire of many Koreans to be recognized as a force in global popular culture. Nonetheless, because the “K” in K-pop demarcates a cognitive boundary in ethnic terms, it inevitably refers to a Koreanness that includes, but is not limited to, Korean culture, ethnicity, nationality, and geography. As Fuhr (2016) puts it, “K-Pop is marked by its inherent desire to be(come) global pop and to erase the K in its name” (p. 16). In the meantime, he also notes, “the K remains a signifier for locality and thus seems to offer an impervious site to the homogenizing effects of globalization” (Fuhr, 2016, p. 16).

This tension between the local and the global has significantly shaped the characteristics of K-pop. Scholars have identified “cultural hybridity” as the driving force behind the global success of the Korean Wave, which, of course, includes K-pop (Chun, 2017; Jin & Ryoo, 2014; Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2006). Both the production and consumption of K-pop have become globalized, and the process has intensified so that it is truly a transnational, hybrid cultural product. In production specifically, the genre has developed through the recruitment of composers, dance choreographers, visual directors, and even the idols themselves from various countries (Yim, 2013). Certainly, K-pop entertainment companies have played a significant role in determining what constitutes “K” in K-pop through their rigorous training system and unique strategies for branding and marketing (Jin & Lee, 2019; Shin & Kim, 2013). These companies train and brand their K-pop idols/artists, ensuring that they embody “authentic Koreanness,” which encompasses not just a certain look but also skills and attitude, while transcending multiple boundaries to appeal to global audiences. Though the music style pursued by each entertainment company may differ, it is through their collective practice of invariable elements, such as “long-term traineeship, early recruitment, and in-house production of musical talent” (Shin & Kim, 2013, p. 266), that a particular K-pop style is shaped.

K-pop fans and audiences are as essential as K-pop entertainment agencies in (re)creating the meaning of “K” in K-pop. Scholars have pointed to the role of social media in propelling this global popularity (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2021; Yoon, 2020). Specifically, social media platforms mediate and nurture a distinct sense of intimacy between fans and their idols (BTS, for example, uses Weverse and VLive; see McLaren & Jin, 2020). Fans’ reaction videos have become a subgenre on YouTube (Oh, 2017), and their online communities and activities are indispensable aspects of the K-pop experience. Such active fan involvement through the expansive use of social media profoundly contributes to the contestation of the boundary making of K-pop by generating public discussion on what then constitutes the “K” in K-pop. As Kim et al. (2018) point out, “K-pop fans are, at some level, producers themselves already, not only as individuals but also because they are a highly systemized collective which enables them to successfully communicate with K-pop labels” (p. 961). In the meantime, it is equally important to remember that the formulation of transnational K-pop is not a seamless process but a continuous contestation among the idols/artists, entertainment companies, and fans so that the genre serves as a cultural space for the simultaneous articulation of transnational desires and conflicts (see Ahn & Lin, 2019).

I argue that the axes of local and global production and consumption, as well as the intersection between them, provide the basis for a nuanced and holistic understanding of K-pop today. These perspectives are especially useful in examining the cases discussed in this article, which stretch the ethnic boundaries of the genre in the face of fans’ resistance. Accordingly, my argument focuses on two related themes. First, I trace the racial boundaries of K-pop by examining fans’ online engagement with EXP, CoCo Avenue, and KAACHI. I address what the “K” represents and who is allowed to perform it. This set of inquiries leads to a discussion of the second theme, cultural appropriation. In particular, my analysis advances the current debates about cultural appropriation by addressing how the growing global popularity of K-pop has impacted the conceptualization of the genre’s debt to African American music. In unpacking these themes, I draw attention to the forces that simultaneously challenge and reinforce the boundaries of K-pop.

K-pop Without Koreans: Cases and Methodology

EXP Edition

EXP first started in 2014 as a graduate school thesis project by Bora Kim at Columbia University in New York. Kim explained, “Our goal with EXP is to successfully debunk countless myths around appropriation, cultural flow, race, gender performativity, and masculinity within K-pop and beyond” (Kim et al., 2018, p. 951). She and her team, a creative collective descriptively named *I’m Making A Boy Band (IMMABB)*, selected the group’s six members from a pool of 200 applicants and released their first EP “Luv/Wrong” (EXP Edition TV, 2015) in 2015. However, two members—both African Americans—left the band when the group decided to move to Korea to continue their careers there. The remaining four members—Šime, Frankie, Koki, and Hunter—eventually debuted in Korea with their first single “Feel Like It” (EXP Edition TV, 2017) in 2017.

Since its launch, the group has received considerable media attention as the first K-pop group with no Korean members, including interviews in major outlets, such as the BBC and *The Huffington Post*, which has increased its visibility. The reactions of fans, however, were largely negative, especially initially. Notably,

90% of the respondents (representing some 52,900 votes) to a 2017 *BuzzFeed* survey asking, “Do you think EXP Edition is a K-pop group?” answered in the negative (Dahir, 2017a). In January 2018, the group released its second single, “Stress” (EXP Edition TV, 2018), and appeared occasionally on mainstream variety shows in Korea in an effort to increase viewership and attract fans, but the attention quickly faded, with interest never going beyond the novelty of the ethnicities of the group’s members.

CoCo Avenue

CoCo Avenue originally comprised six African American women from across the United States who met occasionally to make K-pop covers. These passionate K-pop fans won several awards at K-pop cover competitions, and eventually the group, reduced to a duo—Jenna and Jenny—moved to Korea and debuted with a single titled “어때[Eottae]”² (Jenny Lyric, 2017) in April 2017. While the group’s initial goal was to find success as a K-pop act, the duo focused on presenting a positive image of Black people in the K-pop industry (Dahir, 2017b). The audience response was mixed, ranging from pleasant surprise and support for intent and effort to strong disapproval (Dahir, 2017b). Soon after the debut, however, the band disbanded. Of the three groups considered here, CoCo Avenue received the least media and audience attention, possibly because, having been formed spontaneously, it lacked the systematic promotion that successful K-pop acts enjoyed, and that was simply because it was short-lived.

KAACHI

KAACHI debuted in April 2020 with “Your Turn” (KAACHI, 2020) on the UK label FrontRow Entertainment. The group’s four multinational members—Spaniards Nicol and Chunseo, Briton Dani, and Korean CoCo—unlike the members of EXP and CoCo Avenue—were brought together by an entertainment company, so their experience added another dimension to the discussion of the evolution and extensibility of K-pop. Immediately after their debut, the group faced significant pushback related to charges of copyright infringement of BTS’s logo and song titles, as well as unsubstantiated rumors (Victoria, 2020). A petition demanding that the group disband was even created on *Change.org* with the title “Disband KAACHI (Cancel Them),” which more than 5,000 people had signed as of March 2021 (Esther_theperson, 2020). Despite (or because of) the controversy surrounding KAACHI, however, the group’s first song, “Your Turn,” attracted far more attention than EXP or CoCo Avenue, although the latter debuted several years earlier. While the debut single was poorly received, the response to the follow-up, “Photo Magic” (KAACHI, 2020), a few months later, was more positive, reflecting a conspicuous improvement in members’ choreography and overall performance, although the reception of KAACHI by fans of the genre remains ambivalent and relatively hostile (Mark, 2020).

² This song’s title is in Korean and translates to “How about it?” While it is not uncommon for K-pop songs to have English titles, and most have some English lyrics, notably, CoCo Avenue’s “Eottae” was the only song with a Korean title of the three groups’ releases.

A Note on Methodology

While differing in terms of the racial and gendered composition of their members and how they came together, these three groups have shared the experience of significant backlash from international fan communities who question whether they meet the basic criteria to be considered K-pop. The strong pushback from international fan communities indicates that fans hold rigid expectations of the specific features that they associate with K-pop idols. To explore fans' engagement with these groups as a field for the production of certain knowledge of K-pop, I analyzed the comments sections of each group's official music videos on YouTube. As of February 2021, KAACHI's "Your Turn" had recorded 13,090,315 views with 100,451 user comments (KAACHI, 2020), EXP's "Feel Like It" had 966,454 views with 15,027 comments (EXP Edition TV, 2017), and CoCo Avenue's "Eottae" had 286,557 views with 1,792 comments (Jenny Lyric, 2017). In addition to their official music videos, I examined a couple of YouTube videos produced by reputable media outlets, such as VICE's "The World's Most Controversial K-pop Group" (VICE, 2018), as mentioned above, and an interview conducted by a famous K-pop YouTuber—i.e., "KAACHI is KPOP—Interview with KAACHI" on the DKDKTV YouTube channel (DKDKTV, 2020)—and their comment sections.

For the analysis, I prioritized the popular user comments, which I sorted using the "Top Comments" function on YouTube and continued collecting them until no new patterns appeared; I gathered a total of 2,356 comments. I identified the most popular and most repeated patterns of comments for each group and categorized them according to themes—such as training, language, and race, which appeared in the analysis section—pertaining to discussions on the boundaries of K-pop. While fans' comments on these YouTube videos constitute a primary source of data, an examination of the media discourse on each group via an analysis of articles in popular online magazines and newspapers (such as *BuzzFeed*, *Seoulbeats*, *The Conversation*, VICE, Allkpop, and Billboard), as well as the comments on these articles, is used to supplement the primary data.³

The Power of Fans' Engagement in (Re)Shaping the Boundaries of K-Pop

In articulating objections to and skepticism about these groups' claims of belonging to the K-pop genre, the international fan community online demonstrated a clear and sophisticated understanding of the notion of genre boundaries. Thus, comments on music videos from EXP and KAACHI articulated why these groups are not K-pop:

K-pop is Korean pop. In other words, pop music that is culturally Korean and from Korea.

Factual reason that this [EXP] is not K-pop:

- 1) None of the members are Korean.
- 2) The group did not start in Korea nor are any of the members SK residents.

³ I want to stress that the popular magazine articles and comments sections for the YouTube videos were predominantly written in English, thus indicating the specific nature of the online fan responses to the three groups. It is partly because these groups formed in Anglophone countries (i.e., the United Kingdom and the United States). Accordingly, the media reports about them and interviews with their members were primarily in English and were disseminated through English-language media outlets.

3) A Korean idol company did not produce and/or create the group, nor did they hire any of the members. (Fst***⁴, 2017)

They [KAACHI] are not K-pop because:

- 1) They are not signed under an official Korean company nor label
- 2) Most of their lyrics are English with little to no Korean
- 3) They basically don't have a proper management system
- 4) They did not train much (while kpop idols work their butts off training for years and yet still some don't make it TT)
- 5) They have also don't really have to go through the sometimes DEADLY diets MAJORITY (not all) of idols have to go through
- 6) Some Kpop stans don't like the idea of a non Asian or a person with non Asian background to debut as a kpop idol (Kpo***, 2020)

These commenters offer convincing arguments about what constitutes a "legit" K-pop group. Other fans' online comments on the three groups' videos similarly adduce various criteria to delineate the contours of K-pop, including non-Korean members' ethnicity and/or nationality, proficiency in Korean, geographical location (in terms of both production and management), and training experience. My analysis identified fans' most salient and oft-mentioned criteria: training, language, and ethnicity (specifically, an Asian ethnicity). That is, these highly contentious criteria are commonly cited in the narratives that fans craft to define the boundaries of the K-pop genre.

Training

The fact that none of these groups underwent an established Korean training program appears to be a strong motivation for fans' disapproval and resentment toward them. The unique "incubating system" of intensive and extensive training carried out in the country involves the recruitment of trainees at a young age (sometimes in their preteen years). This preparation of would-be idols for their debuts is responsible for the distinctive character of K-pop as both a musical genre and a style (Jin & Lee, 2019; Kim, 2019). This being the case, fans are especially hostile to groups that bypass the training system; they perceive this as a show of disrespect toward other K-pop groups, as some comments about EXP and KAACHI made apparent.

Average K-pop group trains intensely for 3-5 years with professionals starting at a young age. Everything from vocal, dance, choreography, visual/styling, mannerism, etc. You really can't bypass that and expect a [*sic*] same quality result. (Mar***, 2018)

They [KAACHI] don't deserve the title as a 'Kpop group' as they never had proper experience with training and auditioning in any music company in Korea. They're an insult to those who has [*sic*] worked years to become a kpop idols, and it's an extremely intensive road to achieve. (Fra***, 2020)

⁴ I choose to disclose the first three letters of the user id and changed the rest to three *s to ensure the commenter's anonymity. This applies throughout the entire manuscript.

As these comments demonstrate, the K-pop training system molds and produces a certain look and style with respect to the music, fashion, and visual aesthetic that is indispensable to the genre. The training perfects the K-pop groups' performances on stage; indeed, it is the carefully synchronized group dancing that fans prize the most. Likewise, the idols' clean-cut visual appearances result from the management company's tightly controlled diet, fitness, and skincare regimen. To be exact, the members of KAACHI, managed by a UK label, and EXP, managed by the IMMABB project, received training in dance, language, singing, and stage etiquette (Cayco, 2017), but their training could not match the intense and systematic Korean training approach. Thus, these three groups lacked the benefits of the institutional knowledge that the domestic K-pop industry had accumulated over the past few decades. From the fans' perspective, distance from this training system was a critical factor in excluding these groups from the K-pop genre.

Language

Korean language proficiency is another criterion that fans have used to imagine the K-pop genre, although many K-pop idol groups use English to attract global audiences. Because fluency in Korean is considered a sign of cultural appreciation, the fact that most of the members of the three groups could barely speak the language raised concerns about cultural appropriation (as will be discussed further). Notably, K-pop fans seem keenly attuned to the subtleties of Korean pronunciation as they listen to K-pop songs, including those of non-Korean language speakers. For example, an article in *Seoulbeats* on the controversies relating to EXP (Carley, 2017) described the members' Korean language usage and pronunciation as "stilted and unnatural." In a similar vein, some commenters said of KAACHI's debut:

They aren't Korean, can't speak it, and I feel kinda weird being Korean myself. They shouldn't be called a "K-pop" group if 80% of their music is in English. [...] They should remove "Kpop" as their genre, and do something that is not associated with Korean lyrics. (제니***, 2020)

It took me a while to even realize 90% of the lyrics were in English because the pronunciation was so awkward. Also seems strange to call it a K-pop song when it has like 15 Korean words/phrases in the whole song, most of which are repeated, so it's more like 7 individual Korean phrases. (Kia***, 2020)

These comments indicate that fluency in the Korean language is not simply a marker of cultural appreciation but also a factor that influences how fans experience music and performance. They expect that each member's Korean should, at least, be good enough to facilitate immersion in their songs. EXP and KAACHI violated this expectation by displaying "awkward" Korean (to use Kia***'s expression). By contrast, fans were surprised by CoCo Avenue's clear Korean pronunciations and acknowledged their efforts, distinguishing them from EXP and KAACHI in this regard (as the comments in the section after next by Sta*** and Len*** show).

Beyond the language proficiency of members of the groups, another important criterion for fans is the amount of a song sung in Korean (as Kia***'s comment above indicates). Though English lyrics have a

legitimate place in K-pop, as a manifestation of its hybrid nature (Chun, 2017; Jin & Ryoo, 2014), in both KAAACHI's "Your Turn" (KAAACHI, 2020) and EXP's "Luv/Wrong" (EXP Edition TV, 2015), the proportion of English lyrics was significantly greater than Korean lyrics, in violation of audiences' expectation that the bulk of a K-pop song will be sung in Korean. Furthermore, as Anderson (2020) argued, the Korean language has become a significant part of K-pop's global appeal and fans' experience; thus, some non-native fans find the sound of the Korean language beautiful and have even been inspired to learn it.

Asian Ethnicity and Aesthetics

Now, to what I consider the most intriguing aspect of the critical discourse on these three groups: most or all of their members are neither Korean nor Asian. More precisely, there exists a strong tendency among fans to imagine the racial boundaries of K-pop in ways that exclude non-Asians because they expect that K-pop groups will include mainly Korean members and that non-Korean members, if any, would be Asians. Put differently, the "K" in K-pop establishes a *racial/ethnic boundary* but not necessarily a national one. Numerous online comments on the three groups support this point. One commenter wrote, "They [KAAACHI] dont meet the korean beauty standards either and plus, only one of them is korean. if ur gonna be in kpop aka KOREAN HIP HOP, at least be Asian" (Ana***, 2020). Another commenter stated, "People love Kpop and Jpop for the Asian looks and music. [...] Yes the industry will recruit Japanese and Taiwanese singers but they're 'Asian'" (Ani***, 2018), while the other stated, "I'm not saying that music isn't for everyone, but don't call yourself a Kpop band if you can't put the Korean in Kpop! If you like other cultures, fabulous! But stay in your own damn race!" (Kay***, 2017).

Such comments demonstrate how K-pop fans tend to prefer that K-pop remain (ethnically) Korean, or Asian, at the very least.⁵ This strong preference for Asians indicates that K-pop is highly racialized as "Asian," or more precisely, "Northeast Asian" in the global pop music scene. Put differently, in the current global imagination of K-pop, Asian ethnicities and visual aesthetics largely shared by K-pop stars contribute to the genre's uniqueness. It is, therefore, not coincidental that Koki, the member of EXP who was born to a Japanese mother and a German father, has been better received than his bandmates amid the generally negative response to the group; representative in this respect is a comment under the VICE's documentary on EXP: "Okay that half Japanese guy is actually good though he could join a k-pop group and look Korean" (Kag***, 2018). In this context, I emphasize that most (international) fans use "Asians" to refer to East Asians without considering how diverse Asia is in terms of physical appearance, culture, language, and ethnicity. Thus, fans' preferences for Asian ethnicity deserve greater critical scrutiny, particularly their clear preference in the K-pop aesthetic for fair-skinned natives of Northeast Asia to the exclusion of darker-skinned Asians from the Southeast.

⁵ Some studies on international fans' consumption of K-pop reveal complex racial politics around the K-pop fandom (Oh, 2017; Yoon, 2019). Specifically, Yoon (2019) demonstrates that White fans in Canada are acutely aware of how others perceive them, particularly in the context of stereotypical public perceptions of White fans fetishizing Asians and Asian culture, whereas fans of Asian descent found K-pop to be a valuable cultural resource for positively affirming their Asian Canadian identities. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore fans' (racial) identification when consuming K-pop, it is crucial to note that fans' strong preference for Asian performers inspires a variety of interpretations depending on fans' identities.

In short, the pushback against K-pop groups with few or no Korean or “at least Asian” members reveals the set criteria that fans have for understanding the boundaries of the genre. The most important of these criteria appear to be (1) participation in the Korean training system, which results in perfectly synced choreography and a consistent visual aesthetic for the idols and their videos, (2) proficiency in the Korean language, and (3) (Northeast) Asian ethnicity and aesthetics. Fans’ perceptions and preferences in this regard have emerged, especially in the context of efforts to market non-Asians as performers of K-pop. Equally important, these criteria for the uniqueness of K-pop have not been fixed but have evolved organically with the worldwide popularity of the genre, as its boundaries have been constantly reshaped through multiple contestations.

Racial Politics and Cultural Appropriation in K-Pop⁶

Cultural appropriation has, unsurprisingly, been a key area of debate about the performance of the “K” in K-pop by non-Asians. Thus, the three groups have been accused of appropriating K-pop to garner attention and popularity, having no significant tie to Korea and its culture (except for the native Korean CoCo from KAACHI). The charge of cultural appropriation against these groups is a distinctively significant indicator of the changing status of K-pop in today’s global music scene. While the genre attracted significant numbers of fans across (East) Asia in the 2000s, it remained a regional phenomenon from the perspective of the global music industry. However, with the expansion of social media and the unprecedented global success of BTS in the past decade, K-pop has transcended the country and region it originated from and taken a global, popular culture form (Kim, 2021).

The transition of K-pop from local and regional to global has occasioned an important shift in the debate over cultural appropriation. While the earlier discussion focused on the appropriation of African American music and culture by Koreans, the current discussion focuses on the appropriation of K-pop by non-Koreans. In the words of the *Seoulbeats* article,

Once upon a time, the West was startled by how the Japanese and Koreans had transformed American pop for their own listeners; we’ve reached a new era in which Koreans are now also on the receiving end, seeing how their culture has been consumed and retooled by contemporary audiences around the world for their own ideologies (Angela, 2017, para. 13).

In the following discussion, I examine fans’ engagement with the cultural appropriation debate, considering K-pop’s elevated status in the global music scene and how it became a locus for the contestation of racial politics in relation to the genre.

⁶ This section focuses primarily on the discussion of EXP and CoCo Avenue because they exemplify the international fans’ differing perceptions of K-pop groups’ Black and White members. Though KAACHI’s case offers interesting insights into cultural appropriation, because that group and EXP are similar in terms of racial make-up, I focused on EXP and CoCo Avenue in order to account for the significance of this distinct racial make-up in the broader context of race, cultural appropriation, and the performance of the “K” in K-pop.

Beyond the Dichotomy of Cultural Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation has naturally continued to be widely discussed in the context of globalization (Rogers, 2006; Schneider, 2003). However, as Pham (2017) observes, "In the popular discourse, cultural appropriation/cultural appreciation encompasses a wide and largely incoherent range of cultural practices" (p. 73). A particularly instructive point of contestation about cultural appropriation in relation to K-pop is the clear contrast between fans' perceptions of K-pop groups comprising (mostly) White members and those comprising Black members. Commenters' arguments about cultural appropriation constantly and consciously compare and contrast EXP and CoCo Avenue, respectively. The comparison is particularly instructive because both groups released their debut singles in April 2017. While CoCo Avenue received less media attention than EXP, the fans' responses to the former group were relatively more positive.

Let's be honest here. People liking coco avenue over EXP isn't because of race. LOOK AT THEM. They don't have no cheap knock off name like EXP and they aren't being extra like EXP either. But the major thing is THESE GIRLS ACTUALLY HAVE TALENT. Their Korean doesn't sound like shit at all. (Sta***, 2017)

[...] These girls said that they're trying to teach Koreans how to appreciate black culture. It's obvious that a lot of kpop (especially khiphop) is inspired from [*sic*] black culture, but a lot of times the artists are appropriating the culture and just think being black is ghetto and being a thug. These girls have been actually in the game for a longer time and they appreciate Korean music themselves. EXP is just pushing the title of "All American K-pop group" and thinking they can just get pushed into the scene of K-pop and become successful without putting hard training years into it and not understanding what the struggle of debuting is. (Len***, 2017)

Thus, the audiences of CoCo Avenue and EXP at least occasionally view the differences between the two groups through the lenses of both cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. In popular discourse, cultural appropriation is perceived as the flip side of cultural appreciation and often carries a negative connotation, making it equivalent, in many cases, to "misappropriation." The fans' argument here is that CoCo Avenue shows sincere appreciation for Korean culture, whereas EXP is a cheap copy of K-pop, lacking any such appreciation. In defense of EXP's intentions, and in response to the fans' accusations of cultural appropriation, Frankie, the leader of EXP, said in an interview, "[...] we're appreciating the culture. [...] The thing is, we want to give it our all, so we decided to immerse ourselves in everything from learning the language to adapting the training system" (Hashtag Legend, 2018).

In any case, this discussion leads to the question of whether EXP and CoCo Avenue appropriate or appreciate K-pop. The cultural appreciation/appropriation paradigm, however, gives too much weight to artists' intentions, which are often subjective or otherwise unverifiable. As Pham (2017) rightly points out, "Cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation—two interpretations of the same process rather than contradictory concepts—foreground questions of personal feelings and intentions" (p. 69). The paradigm flattens the discussion by forcing a broad and complex issue into a binary framework. Hence, it is, I argue, necessary to transcend it and look instead at the *conditions* under which appropriation occurs and its *effect*.

From this perspective, the question of whether those involved in appropriating K-pop—which, in this case, hinges on whether a non-Korean act has attempted to work within the genre appreciatively (CoCo Avenue) or, rather, in a manner deemed appropriation (EXP)—depends on the broader context of the racial politics that inform global popular culture.

K-Pop as a Field of Racial Contestation

Regardless of the seriousness of EXP's intention to create and perform K-pop, the group's authenticity and originality remained in question because a significant portion of its target audience perceived them as committing an act of cultural domination, being White Americans with little understanding of Korea or Korean culture. The racial politics of K-pop is a function of how the genre has achieved global popularity and, indeed, established itself as an alternative to White-centered, American-dominated pop culture (H. J. Lee, 2020; Yoon, 2019). The current widespread K-pop fandom in Western countries (including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Spain) is indebted to non-White, multiracial/multiethnic fans with an interest in resisting the dominant cultural flow within and beyond the United States (H. J. Lee, 2020).

The cultural motivation for international fans to enjoy K-pop reflects the status of the genre as a symbolic battlefield on which fans relish the opportunity to push back against the White privilege that pervades global popular culture. This, I suggest, is the context in which antipathy toward EXP should be understood. The comments below are instructive:

Honestly, people are saying it's because they're white that's the reason why they shouldn't be in K-pop, but that's not the only reason. It's more of how they're Americans trying to break through in the K-pop industry and how it's not really authentic cuz they're not Korean or at least Asian. [...] Also, how many Asians do you see that are at the top of pop American music or at least heavily relevant like BTS is in K-pop? (Jus***, 2017)

In many Western countries, Asian people have been pushed under the rug a little, reduced to stereotypes and hardly ever given a chance in the entertainment industry. Kpop became a space where (East) Asian artists could promote themselves and finally get a chance in the industry where Western and American pop are already very prev[alent] and popular. (Cec***, 2017)

As these commenters describe it, K-pop has become a symbolic cultural field that offers a representational space for fans worldwide to celebrate and admire Asian artists. This situation is rare given the uneven distribution of power in the global entertainment industry, in which Asians have found success difficult to achieve. Part of the argument for opposing EXP is that White artists should not be allowed a free pass to participate in creating K-pop "when Korean idols have tried for so long to break into the US music scene" (Carley, 2017, para. 4), and when, as shown in the comments above, artists of (East) Asian descent still experience racial hostility and discrimination in the industry. To some degree, the fans' highly negative responses to EXP serve as a critique of the industry practice that systematically privileges White artists.

Aware of these circumstances, fans have become increasingly protective of K-pop in terms of keeping the genre largely Korean and entirely Asian.

K-Pop, African American Music, and Cultural Appropriation

CoCo Avenue's K-pop performance involves a distinct sort of racial politics in the cultural appropriation debate. A commenter explicitly contrasted EXP and CoCo Avenue in the following terms:

Both members of CoCo Avenue have done their own Korean covers for years now, they have already clarified [that] they aren't trying to be a kpop group at all. The song is half English half Korean, and it's an r&b song which btw has a genre that comes from African Americans so who the hell they appropriating? The song is actually god damn good at that. All they wanted to do was put a song out, it's not their fault they got exposure from it. On the other hand EXP wanted exposure, damn near ripped off a group's name, put a whole ass Korean song out that sounds like a thrown away backstreet boys song. (Dar***, 2017)

Especially interesting here is the fundamental question of who is appropriating whose culture and for what purpose. Dar*** makes an intriguing argument that what CoCo Avenue is doing is not, after all, appropriation because the African American members of the group are performing R&B-style songs with musical roots in African American culture. That is, it is difficult to accuse them of appropriating K-pop. In fact, the duo being African Americans who perform R&B music with a K-pop style confirm their authenticity to their fans. This kind of logic, however, inevitably sparks debate about who owns culture and who defines originality.

Indeed, the strong influence of African American music on K-pop in terms of its sound and style, including vocal, choreography, and fashion, is undeniable (Anderson, 2020; Song, 2019), and many Korean hip-hop artists and idols freely acknowledge that they have been inspired by Black music (H. J. Lee, 2020; Song, 2019). Likewise, popular idols have incorporated cornrows and dreadlocks into their hairstyles, a fashion choice that many international fans of K-pop (especially Black ones) have criticized because these idols fail to credit Black culture, or they use it without acknowledging the history of racism against Black people (Taylore, 2015). Kim (2020) has described K-pop artists' excessive imitation of Black music as a "racial surplus," a condition in which racial copying repeatedly occurs; she attributes the absence of any substantial engagement with the historical context of African American music by practitioners of the genre to mass production. In today's extremely competitive and fast-shifting entertainment industry, racially marked cultural items are often commodified as sources of profit and consumed as mere fashion accessories (Hamilton, 2021).

Of particular note here is that K-pop's appropriation of African American music has been discussed, not in the context of cultural appropriation, but from the perspective of *cultural hybridity*, as mentioned earlier. Whereas cultural appropriation—or "cultural exploitation" in Rogers' (2006) typology—commonly describes the consumption of minority culture by the dominant culture for profit. The notion of cultural hybridity emerged in the context of postcolonial studies to explain cultural dynamics in a space occupied

simultaneously by colonial power/culture and local culture (Bhabha, 1994; Canclini & Chiappari, 1995). Thus, the discussion on K-pop's incorporation of stylistic elements from African American music and artists has not involved the framework of cultural appropriation because African American music has been perceived less as that of a minority culture but more as a globally popular form of the dominant American popular culture (Oh, 2014). Viewed this way, the embrace of African American music and style by K-pop represents a continuation of the strong influence of American popular music on the Korean entertainment industry since the Korean War (Kim & Saeji, 2021).

Thus, the influence of African American music on K-pop has been discussed as an aspect of a (unique) cultural hybridization process, and even celebrated as a factor in the genre's worldwide success (Anderson, 2020; Hamilton, 2021; Kim, 2020; Taylore, 2015). More importantly, this cultural hybridity has been legitimized by fans as fundamental to the unique style of K-pop (see Anderson, 2020). This appropriation can be described as—to return to Rogers' (2006) typology—"transculturation" in the sense that K-pop is "created from multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic" (p. 477). In this respect, K-pop challenges popular notions of cultural ownership and originality because its cultural essence is not Koreanness but a hyper-capitalist cultural hybridity that absorbs many cultural elements from around the world and processes them into a "Korean style" through its particular production system and marketing strategies.

The current debate about K-pop exemplifies the notion of a "copy without original" (Baudrillard, 1994; Deleuze, 1990) in the sense that cultural appropriation itself lies at the heart of the genre's conventions. Indeed, this cultural hybridity, arrived at through the work of cultural appropriation, is part of what makes K-pop uniquely Korean. For this reason, at least, some fans have welcomed the participation of non-Koreans (and non-Asians) in the genre, acknowledging that it is the product of the constant appropriation of cultural elements from outside Korea. Therefore, I argue that the cultural appropriation debate in the cases of EXP and CoCo Avenue has fundamentally unsettled, on multiple levels, an association between race and music genre (e.g., the association between Blacks and R&B, jazz, and hip hop, as well as between Koreans/Asians and K-pop) long assumed to be natural. The challenge now is to think outside the framework of cultural appropriation when navigating the ongoing expansion and contestation of the "K" in K-pop.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined media discourse and fans' responses to three K-pop groups with few or no Korean and/or Asian members—EXP, CoCo Avenue, and KAACHI—to trace the boundaries of the genre. The attempts by these groups to enter the K-pop marketplace have led fans to debate who can legitimately perform the "K" in K-pop. While this "K" can be interpreted variously to mean considerations of language, ethnicity, production style, and even geographical location, the strong disapproval of these groups by many fans focuses mainly on shortcomings associated with (Korean style) training, linguistic proficiency in Korean, and Asian ethnicities and aesthetics. Their strong attachment to Asianness indicates that international fans imagine K-pop to be (racially) Asian. The fans' comparisons of EXP with CoCo Avenue demonstrate the status of K-pop as a symbolic cultural space for racial contestation. Thus, while the members of EXP have been perceived as White performers engaging in the cultural appropriation and

exploitation of Korean culture, CoCo Avenue, while also experiencing pushback, has received a more positive response owing to the complex relationship between K-pop and Black music and culture.

There was a time, then, when the perception among fans was that only Koreans could legitimately perform the “K” in K-pop. However, with the ever-increasing popularity of the genre and the transnational production of K-pop acts, other Asians have been included within the boundaries of K-pop, albeit limited to particular aesthetics. The performance of the “K” by non-Asians, however, has continued to meet with significant pushback from the fans. More recently, however, the media conglomerate HYBE (formerly known as Big Hit Entertainment and the home of BTS) and Universal Music Group announced plans to collaborate on the creation of a global K-pop boy band. Furthermore, 5High, India’s (supposed) first K-pop girl group, whose members were selected through an audition program organized by Livon and 9XO, is preparing for its debut. These recent efforts point to a new direction for K-pop in which the genre is no longer limited to (Northeast) Asians, as performers representing various races, ethnicities, and cultures gradually become integrated into the imaginary of K-pop. Nevertheless, the question lingers regarding what, precisely, constitutes K-pop when the “K” no longer marks the genre as exclusively Korean or Asian.

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