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Becoming-Black: Exploring Korean Hip-hop in the Age of Hallyu

Kyung Hyun Kim
(University of California, Irvine)

Abstract

This article examines the emergence of rap and hip-hop in contemporary South Korea. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's idea of "becoming black," it proceeds from the view of hip-hop as a worldwide phenomenon made possible by the fact that "blackness" has gained a "new fungibility" in the epoch of global capitalism. The essay explores the ways in which hip-hop performers in South Korea draw on their own experiences of social marginality in the ghetto-like world produced by unrelenting academic and economic competition to create their work. It also considers the ways in which the Korean language obliges rappers to experiment with its syntax and prosody in order to generate the rhymes and repetitions associated with the hip-hop genre. While rap in the South Korean context is often regarded as a successful adaptation of a foreign musical genre, in a manner that recalls the discovery and mastery of Western popular music by Korean musicians in the years following the Korean War, the essay also argues that the reception of hip-hop in the present reestablishes ties to premodern and pre-colonial practices of oral musical storytelling, such as *p'ansori*, that were neglected and overlooked during the period of modernization.

Keywords: blackness, *Critique of Black Reason*, double consciousness, hip-hop, Korea

In his recent book, *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Achille Mbembe argues that the corporate logic of the liberal world of the early twenty-first century creates a new laboring subject that carries an "infinite series of structurally insolvent debts." Taking a cue from Deleuze, he points out that this new condition fuses capitalism and animism to produce what he calls a "new man" who is stripped of all power of self-determination and "transformed into animate things made up of coded digital data."[1] He declares that for the first time in human history, "the term 'Black' has been generalized," having acquired a "new fungibility." Blackness has been "institutionalized as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet," in a process that Mbembe calls "the *Becoming Black of the world*."[2] Mbembe's re-articulation of the fungible sense of "black" raciality that is no longer defined only by and for "people of African origin" remains consistent with Deleuze's other concepts such as anti-Oedipal schizo, the body-without-organs, and perhaps most relevantly here, the reality of the virtuality that constantly actualizes various potentialities and affects of power. The term "black" signals not only a series of traumatic and excruciating historical experiences, but also, once you reverse it, an "act of creation and capab[ility] of living in the midst of several times and several histories at once."[3] By carrying out such a reversal, what Mbembe is suggesting is that the new century's hopes and optimism—despite the continuing domination of global capitalism and its insidious mode of regulating populations—are embedded in the liberating sign of the "black."

By placing my focus on the idea of the "Becoming-Black-of-the-World," I am not interested in this essay in reprising the several decades–old argument about the authenticity of hip-hop that points only to an ethnic fixity or a hyper-commodified essentialism about race and blackness. Now, every ethnic community around the globe seems to be engaged in producing its own local rap culture, recreating its own version of the "black man."[4] South Korea just happens to be one of them. Along the lines of Mbembe's conceptualization of the "black man," I am also considering how the participation of Korean Americans and Koreans in creating a global rap culture opens up to the Korean subject what W. E. B. Du Bois once suggested was a defining aspect of the African American

experience: "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."[5] In other words, rap music enables the Koreans to visualize what Du Bois called *double consciousness* and more fully explore the meanings of a multiple consciousness in an ongoing mix. What I am attempting to probe, in an effort to move away from the question of whether Koreans who share no cultural heritage with African Americans have a right to rap or not, is the issue of whether or not the verses of Korean spirituality can be paired with that of the African American's. I intend to engage these questions after an analysis of Korean rap's linguistic and sonic qualities that may also refigure the aesthetic qualities of rap music itself.

As such, this paper offers an open exploration, using the questions that comprise the crux of my current study of Korean popular culture. Just as much as an African American has felt his "two-ness" as an American and a Negro, with "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" and "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder,"[6] any Korean born in the twentieth century will know what it means to move through the world with this kind of *double consciousness*. In the first half of the twentieth century, a Korean had to chart a path forward while torn between the "two warring ideals" of Japanese imperialism and Korean identity; in the second half of the century, he or she had to reconcile the irreconcilable ideals of the United States and Korea. Immediately following the Korean War, during the 1950s and early 1960s, Korean music performers had to learn various genres of American popular music on the fly in order to perform for the American soldiers stationed in Korea, whose numbers reached as high as 80,000 even after the U.S. had signed an armistice with North Korea in 1953.[7] It is well documented that many of the best Korean performers and composers of the day, including Patti Kim and Shin Joong-hyun, grew out of this new music tradition that began when the American military services needed Koreans to perform their music. As ethnomusicologist Dohee Kwon argues, the main tension in the realm of musical genres in Korea during these decades was *not* between the traditional local music such as *p'ansori* and foreign music, *but* between what she calls Japanese-colored songs (JCS) that were composed in the Western-Japanese pentatonic scale, in which the fourth (Fa) and seventh

(Ti) notes of the octave scale (Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-Ra-Ti-Do) were missing, and the American-styled Korean popular music (AKPM).[8]

In both the culture of African American communities at the beginning of the twentieth century and that of the war-ridden, US-occupied region of South Korea a half century later, the souls of the black folk and those of the Korean folk had to find themselves, as Du Bois suggested, *not* by resurrecting an essentialized ethnic or national identity, but by an "original method" of "blending" what came from a non-essentialized elsewhere with what is other to it. In "The Sorrow Songs" which is included in his collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois discusses how the "elements of *both* Negro and Caucasian" had to be recovered in a song in order for "the slave" to speak "to the world."[9] After having been emancipated from the Japanese in 1945 and having had to endure the era of American military occupation, the Korean musician found no well-trodden path of *p'ansori* available. He or she had to learn to mimic the elements of American genre and wait for the Korean soul to infuse into it. The hope in the song breathed through the sorrow; and it took, for instance, an accomplished Korean blues musician and composer, Shin Joong Hyun, almost two decades after cutting his teeth as a child prodigy guitarist playing in US military clubs, before he eventually perfected a distinctly Korean rock sound in "Miin" ("Beauty").[10]

For rock music and ballad-driven pop, the effort to master and "blend" American music was a difficult but not an impossible accomplishment for Koreans. However, because hip-hop culture is tattooed in the language of black vernacular from the hood, the assimilation process of rap for non-English speaking regions such as South Korea proved to be even more difficult. After all, style, food, or even musical beats can migrate from one society to another with relative ease. One can learn how to cut a style of garment from a different culture, experiment with a new culinary recipe, or play a foreign sounding beat on an instrument within *hours*, if that person is already gifted as a designer, a cook, or a musician. Appropriations are most difficult, however, if not impossible, when it comes to language, because language is deeply rooted in the formative experiences of family and community. Even if you are a gifted linguist, foreign language acquisition normally takes years to master a

level of *linguistic authentication*. You may be the best rapper ever to have walked on planet Earth, but if you are asked to step into a recording booth, can you be sure, after having taken just a few lessons, that you could spit immaculate verses that rhyme in a *foreign* language? Even a Dr. Dre can't help you there, because, again, this is not only a difficult task, but perhaps an altogether impossible one. Virtuosity in rap is determined not only by coming in hard on the first beat, but also by properly enunciating an aspirated consonant such as the 'krrr…' sound, such as the word *cruisin'* that opens up the chorus section of N.W.A.'s famous anthem song, "Boyz-n-the-Hood," which rhymes with *krrr* of "Crenshaw Boulevard" and is forceful enough to make the succeeding syllables roll out with ease. It is difficult for anyone unfamiliar with the street vernacular form of Compton to get it precisely right.[11]

I set to explore these two issues: first, if hip-hop has indeed created a benchmark of rhetorical innovations for social minorities, in what sense has this cultural aesthetic, which is both emergent and hegemonic right now across the globe, helped to integrate the disenfranchised Korean soul into the global popular culture industry? Second, what I am gravitating toward is the idea that the waning of melody might be tied to the re-authenticating of Korean-ness in oral musical storytelling, either in the form of *p'ansori* or *mandam* (comedy standup), which were popular during the Japanese colonial era but on the wane in the years following liberation but since then has enjoyed a rebirth, one could argue, with the popularity of hip-hop over the past two decades. This amplification of the rapture experienced in the blending of Korean-ness and blackness in the Korean hip-hop scene will lead hopefully to an aesthetic analysis that recalibrates Korean aesthetic identity for today's global era. In responding to these two questions, I also focus on a couple of factors that had to take place for hip-hop to be rooted in Korea as a form of "becoming-black-of-the-world." First, as discussed above, the language barrier between Korean and English had to be compromised so as to facilitate the capacity to rap in the Korean language. Second, Koreans had to undo their ingrained linguistic tendencies and reconstruct a Korean musical sensibility acquired through the rhymes and flows of melody in Korean *kayo* (pop song) by constantly hitting the beat hard

on the first syllable of a line or flow of a rhyme.[12] This accentuation of the first syllable of a word in the opening of a rap reconciles not only both blackness and Koreanness in a hip-hop rhyme, but also draws attention to the gap between Korean, a syllable-timed language, and English, a stress-timed language. Furthermore, as later demonstrated in my analysis of Woo Won-jae's rap, syllables that were perfectly in tune with African American vernacular, but regarded as somewhat coarse in everyday conversational Korean, had to be ventured in a rap song in order to evoke the cynical urban American style of language that became popular among Korean youth as early as the 1990s.

Show Me the Money and Woo Won-jae

There are quite possibly many reasons why *American Idol* became such a phenomenally successful television platform in the United States and abroad. The diminished popularity of the sitcom in primetime television, the re-emergence of cable television channels such as MTV as a successful showcase of inexpensive and popular reality shows, and the interactive Internet social media culture that promoted user participation in selecting finalists, all played a part in making the audition television show a landmark cultural phenomenon. However, a less visible, but highly charged impetus came from the U.S. recording industry, the profits of which kept declining every year in the twenty-first century, as each and every advance that increased the speed of the Internet served to lower the price of digital music. Clive Davis, one of the world's most prolific pop music producers, was persuaded to enter into a partnership with *American Idol* during the early seasons when Kelly Clarkson and Jennifer Hudson became stars simply because "pop music was diminishing in impact."[13] The man who was responsible for the signing of the superstars of the final three decades of 20th Century, such as Billy Joel, Neil Diamond, Barry Manilow, Chicago, and Whitney Houston, was now too old-fashioned to embrace hip-hop, which quickly grew to become the most financially profitable genre in the 1990s. Television, which Davis shunned during the early days of his producing career, now made sense for him as it spoke directly to the American heartland

in the form of a reality-television audition program. *American Idol* gave a much-needed lifeline to ballad-driven pop music. Davis' role as the head of BMG Music Publishing was essential to *American Idol* because most of the songs that the contestants sang were licensed from his company in the first place.

If audition programs in America sprang up in part out of the music industry's effort to appeal to the provincial America that still savored the crooning style of pop singing and to regain greater market share against urban hip-hop music and club beats, it would seem an irony that the resurgence of hip-hop in Korea over the past five years owes itself to the launching of a television rap audition program. *Show Me the Money* (*SMTM*) began life with only a hard-core fan base in 2012, but its popularity enabled its first winner, Loco, to reach stardom. *SMTM* quickly became one of the most popular audition programs in Korea, so that by its fourth and fifth seasons (2015-16), it scored the highest viewer ratings ever recorded for a music program show on cable television. For example, ten thousand participants signed up to audition for *SMTM 4* in Seoul and the show attracted some of the biggest names in television such as comedian Jeong Joon-ha (of *Infinite Challenge* fame). It created enough of a sensation to feature surprise judges such as the American rapper Snoop Dogg.[14] *SMTM*'s chief producer at Mnet channel, Han Dong-chol, who also produces *Produce 101*, a K-pop idol reality television show that is also popular among the young viewers in Korea, has stated that his goal in creating the program was "to let people know that there is more than just idol dance music in Korea."[15] If K-pop was built on bubblegum pop and the sexually suggestive and immaculately choreographed dancing of its young idols, essentially rejecting the vestige of any Romantic ideals associated with the image of the "independent musician-artist," *SMTM* and its spin-off *High School Rappers* intuitively understood that the role of a rapper or an MC in contemporary South Korea is to restore the tradition of storytelling or standup tradition of *mandam* [漫談] that was immensely popular during the Japanese colonial era. The tradition of satire in *p'ansori* and *mandam* that had all but disappeared in South Korea because of the draconian censorship during the years of military rule and the dominance of

American-influenced popular culture would ironically return—slowly but discernibly—through the rap audition program where youngsters created poetry and performances by protesting against and even ridiculing their own education ghetto hell.

The storyteller-performer who creates a pose by drawing on autobiographical details such as his or her name, ethnic identity, past illnesses, bodily art, and other life experiences cuts a common figure in many of the *American Idol*–style audition programs that have thrived in Korea. Since the smash success of *Superstar K* in 2009, audition survival reality shows such as *K-pop Star* and *Produce 101*, which feature a combination of professional judges, live Internet, and text-voting participation from viewers have garnered high ratings in markets all over Asia. *SMTM*, a rap-only audition program, distinguishes itself from other programs by its interviews with the contestants who talk about their struggles in life and also by the encouragement it gives them to engage with and transcend their hardships so that they may achieve and deliver a cathartic enjoyment through their self-composed songs.[16] This self-reflexive blurring of the boundary between the autobiographical "I" of the anonymous contestant and the posturing "I" of the rapper performer became the perfect television medium material in the era of the smartphone where real-life stories trending through the Internet are often considered to be far more engaging than the fictive and one-dimensional stories that unfold on the traditional screens of television and movies.

Given the expectations that rappers write their own original music and lyrics, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the most poetically-minded performers get quite far in the competition. Among the record number of 12,000 contestants gathered to audition for *SMTM* Season 6 (2017), it was Woo Won-jae, then an unknown 22-year old college student, who became a star. Woo reached the final three, and his single, "Sich'a" ("Time Difference," the song was released in the US as "We Are."), written and released during the show, became the only number one track that *SMTM* released during that season. The single also became an anthem song on college campuses.[17] Making a run to the Top Three on the final day of competition against veteran rappers—and gaining

acclaim as one of the very few amateurs to have made it that far in the history of the contest—Woo became an overnight sensation. The success of Woo Won-jae, a student who had to overcome mental illness even to get into college, merits attention, for he not only embraces fully the autobiographical "posturing" of rap culture, but also because Woo's technique makes impressive use of internal rhymes and unorthodox word breaks that elevate his songs to the virtuosity of great Korean poetry. I argue that Woo Won-jae rescues Korean rap from the domain of dance and club music by synching it with the genre of autobiographical storytelling. Fully exploiting the essence of swag by retaining the subjectivity of the "I," he rapped about his struggles with anti-depressant pills and his repeated hospitalizations.

Twenty-three years have elapsed since the legendary Korean pop star Seo Tai-ji rapped about the misguided zeal for education in Korea in his song, "Classroom Ideology." Unsurprisingly, the theme of educational tyranny has become a motif of many Korean rap songs since the classroom is the one place which almost every Korean would identify as a ghetto-like experience, being trapped for endless hours to prepare for college entrance exams. The opening lines of "Sich'a" are as follows:

밤새 모니터에 튀긴 침이 Bamsae moni**t'eo** e **twi**gin **ch**im-i	Even before the spit smudged on the monitor of an all-night session dries up,
마르기도 전에 강의실로 Mareugido jeon e Kanguisilro	
아 참 교수님이 문신 땜에 A ch'am kyosunim I munsin ttaem-e	(I head) to the lecture hall oh yeah (I forgot), cuz of my tattoos, the prof told me to wear long sleeves
긴 팔 입고 오래 ~~ Kin p'al ipko orae~~	
난 시작도 전에 눈을 감았지 Nan sijakdo jeon-e nun-eul kamat ji	I close my eyes before the lecture starts
날 한심하게 볼 게 뻔하니 이게 더 편해 Nal hanshimhage bol-ke bbeonhani Igae deo pyeonhae	He's gonna think I'm a loser anyway, so it's better this way

Despite the similar focus placed on the stifling conformity of the classroom, the differences between the song rapped by Seo Tai-ji in 1995 and the one by Woo Won-jae in 2017 are stark. Even though Seo wrote lyrics about the "ghetto-like experiences" that many teenagers in Korea have to go through because of the education fever of their parents and because of the grade-based social hierarchies, he never rapped about his *own* experience of dropping out of middle school in order to pursue a career in music. Hesitant to utilize the almost too-obvious elements from his personal life, only hyperbolic metaphors and mediocre figures such as "we are sold off to package centers" are left to convey the anger in Seo's rap song, "Classroom Ideology." Though a pioneer in music and dance, Seo's forte was never in lyrics.

In contrast, Woo achieves a fluent command of Korean rap vernacular by setting his story within the realm of his own experience as both rapper and college student. The first two lines of "Sich'a," set the tone of the song by physically moving between two different spaces: the computer workspace where the narrator has spent all night working out his rap verses and the lecture hall where he needs to hustle to in order to get to class on time: "Even before the spit smudged on the monitor of an all-night session dries up, (I head) to the lecture hall/Oh yeah (I forgot), cuz of my tattoos, the prof told me to wear long sleeves." Temporally too, these two different spaces are divided between day and night. The class, of course, takes place in daytime, during which Woo Won-jae, who has forgotten to wear his long sleeve shirt to cover his tattoos, will fall asleep since he feels that the professor has already given up on him anyway. As evidenced by his "spit" that has left a smudge on the computer monitor, which is a metonymic figuration of his "rap verses" that have yet to be edited, it is his nocturnal hobby, rather than his daytime class, that draws his attention far more. "Spitting" is not a traditional metaphor that can be traded for an equivalent value as a symbol of something else; it is a metonymic stand-in for "rapping," which retires the grand ideology (or as Seo Tai-ji would say "yidea") that was pervasive among the previous generation of rappers including Tiger JK. The posturing self of the "I" in the song rushes to his college classroom where, despite having graduated high school and having reached the age of adulthood,

he lives in a world still vigilantly regulated by dress codes that decry his bodily art. Woo Won-jae has taken the theme of "classroom tyranny" into both the space of the private and the signification of a post-metaphoric, metonymic vernacular that realign his rap with the cultural mood that is just as innovative and self-reflexive as that which produced some of the best rap stars, such as Notorious B.I.G. or Eminem, who have graced the American pop scene over the past 30 years.

As local cultural critic Yoon Kwang-eun observes, the track "Sich'a" features Woo's *hustle* that "protests against *not* the poverty and police of the [American] ghetto, but the lifelong standardized-test driven system of Korea that tries to set the clock to one single standard that dictates the tempo and manners of everyone's daily lives."[18] The revolt against the homogenization and uniformity in the classroom is carried forward not only through its theme of *si-ch'a*, which, as explained above, literally means "time difference" in Korean, but also through a rhyme structure that uses internal rhymes, the simultaneous lining of rhyme schemes, bar lines that do not enclose sentences, and an assemblage of aspirated consonants. In the first line, "t'eo-e" is broken off from the Korean loanword of *monitor* and pairs with "jeon-e" in the second line, but is also usurped by another flow of rhyme that begins with the first word of second line, "gi-do," which triangulates the first word of the third line, "silro," and the second word of the fourth line, "ipko." None of these word-ending rhymes are regulated by the syntactical rules governing the ends of sentences. They are motivated by rhythmic structures that constantly cross the bar lines in order to assemble a smoother flow for the rap.

The search for a smooth rap flow is not just about hitting the first note hard (such as Eazy E's "krrrr" of "Cruisin'" or Seo Tai-ji's "arrr" of "Arayo"), but also about lining up the aspirated consonants such as "t," "k," or "p" that actually mobilize a vulgar group of sounds in standard Korean that, as a matter of fact, accompany the better ring-tone high-pitched beats of today. What is impressive about the quality of cadence that mediates the seemingly chaotic rhymes of Woo's rap lines is the manner in which his carefully chosen Korean words build a sound template of almost-Western phonetic cacophony. In English, accents on

aspirated consonants and tense consonants such as the "S" of "Sam" are frequent and popular, but these same sounds are rare and even shunned in the standard and plain Korean lexicon that tend to avoid confrontation and intensity. The "S" of "Sam," for instance, produces a double consonant of an "s" sound ("ssang-siot") that Koreans usually identify with the sound of obscenities. Aspirated sounds or tense sounds in Korean are frequently associated with slovenly, animalistic, or barbaric behavior.

As I have earlier discussed, the accenting of the first syllables in rap tend to lay down the foundation of each song's rhymes with aspirated or tense consonants, since the English language does not necessarily discriminate against "k," "p," "t," or "ch" sounds. These sounds often make up the foundations of effective and efficacious "spits" of rap verses. Korean rappers, in order to reach a poetic sophistication that best matches up with the beats of rap which come in with metallic cymbal or high pitch drum sounds, have to abandon their humble plain consonants and find sounds that are deliberately impolite. Woo Won-jae, rather than dipping into English phrases or resorting to loan words, chooses three words that build the flow of the first line—the "t'eo" is accentuated by separating it from the word "monitor" (moni*t'eo*). By so doing, he creates "t'eo" (터), a sound that closely resembles the onomatopoeic sound of the spit pitched out of the mouth (t'wae, 퇴), and triples it with "spit" (ch'im, 침) and the verb action of "smudged" or "splat" (t'wikin, 튀긴). All three words triangulate the same action of a "spit" that uses the aspirated consonants t'eo (터), twi (튀), and ch'i (치), suggesting that his song is already more vulgar and unruly than one which might be expected from a humble college student who feels stressed from having to wear long sleeve shirts to cover up his tattoos. The "t'eo," the t'wi," and the "ch'im" in the first line driven by fluid (ch'im) spat out (t'wikin) localize the flow of Woo by defamiliarizing standard Korean usage. It effectively triangulates the rhyming flow of the provocative opening line of the song, innovating within the Korean language by defamiliarizing it.

밤새 모니터에 튀긴 침이 Bamsae monit'eo e twigin chim-i	Even before the spit smudged on the monitor of an all-night session dries up,
마르기도 전에 대기실로 Mareugido jeon e Daekisilro	(I head) to the dressing room (of a television studio),
아 참 문신 땜에 A ch'am kyosunim I munsin ttaem-e	oh yeah (I forgot), (I was) told to wear long sleeves
긴 팔 입고 오래 Kin p'al ipko orae	Cuz of my tattoos

Storytelling is an art form that must take the passage of time into consideration. After Loco, the winner of the first season of *SMTM*, raps the second verse, and Gray sings the hook,[19] Woo returns to the microphone and sings the final verse of the song. All of the words in the first two lines of the last verse are identical to the words in the opening of the song, with two exceptions. Woo has, first, deleted "Kyosunim" (professor) from the final verse and has, second, replaced the word "Lecture Hall" with the word "Dressing Room" (of the television studio). This repetition with these one-word replacements creates a powerful shift that catapults the narrating rapper/student from a *private* citizen going to class to a *public* media star waiting to perform on camera for millions of people. The repetition and difference best serve a Deleuzeian affect or a Joycean eternal recurrence that is inherently transgressive—both formally and thematically—which allows Woo to *both* proudly swag about his maturity as a musician that has earned him a national reputation and sadly lament Korea's social condition that symbolically imprisons the rapper in a system of surveillance. So much has changed, and yet nothing has changed. He cannot but humbly acknowledge the power of a regimented culture and the state apparatus that still censors him and his bodily art. In the music video for "Sich'a," released by CJ's Mnet, Woo Won-jae does not showcase his tattoos and is instead seen

wearing a long sleeve shirt.[20] Day and night have been reversed, as he is able to spit his rap verses no longer just at night, but during the day as well, but the true revolution has yet to take place. Woo Won-jae pushes the thematic power of the *negation of a negative present status quo* as far as he can, by committing to neither an affirmative change in the future nor a rejection of it in the present.

The most famous epistolary pop song ever written might possibly be one of the early songs of the Beatles: "P.S. I Love You." But if you were to ask anyone under the age of 40 today, you would find that that distinction probably belongs to rapper Eminem's "Stan," a song released in 2000. The song is structured around verses that read as if they were fan letters written to Slim Shady, Eminem's alter ego. The haunting first two verses begin with "dear Slim," with the third verse followed up with "Dear Mister 'I'm Too Good to Call Or Write My Fans.'" The tension escalates as the crazy fan Stan begins to show signs of being obsessed and furious, threatening to commit violence against his pregnant girlfriend and himself. In the last verse, Eminem himself finally raps, breaking his code of silence, with "Dear Stan." The song has hit a nerve with people all around the world and far beyond just the hard-core rap fans because of the affective and somewhat rare dramatic pop song storytelling. However, even in this song, what is important to note is that between the verse breaks the distinction between Stan, the fictive fan, and the target of his adoration, obsession, and later hate, Eminem, remains clear.

Not only does the Korean language often obfuscate the use of the singular first person (na, 나) and plural first person (uri, 우리) in both oral and written communication, but also it strongly avoids, along with Japanese and Thai, the use of the pronoun "you."[21] These obfuscations and omissions of subjects and addressees not only create confusion for translators trying to render Korean literature into English,[22] but also helps make it virtually impossible for foreign readers or listeners to establish who is speaking and who is being addressed in Korean poems and songs. The recent surge of the use of Kakao talk chatrooms by Koreans with their smartphones make the already-opaque condition of distinguishing between the speaking subjects and the addressees in a conversation even more difficult. The rise of "Kakao talkscape,"

commented upon by media scholar Dal Yong Jin,[23] represents a blending of a creative individualized lifestyle with a participatory and public mode of subjectivity for almost all Koreans today where new fun idioms, emoticons, and other expressive forms of communications are invented and circulate, but it is also a realm where a variety of societal stresses, such as peer bullying, the pressures of a Confucian hierarchical order, and never-ending work-hours also become heightened—so much so that the government recently had to issue guidelines to discourage employees from sending out "talk" messages to each other after work hours.

New Korean rap verses help capture the essence of a "Kakao talkscape" milieu where the new form of language and communication, as well as peer and family pressures emerge, as evoked by Vinxen's song: "For I'm 100 percent certain that I suffer from the victim complex of a pessimist [비관론자의 마인드 피해망상 백프로 찍고]/ It's again time to blame myself [이제 다시 날 탓 할 차례]/ But that's why my present address basement room is both cold and beautiful [현주소 지하방이 가장 춥고 아름다워]/ I am both grateful and sick and to my father I am sorry [고맙고 또 아프고 아빠에게는 너무 미안해]" opens the first verse of the hit single "Not At All" by Vinxen (Lee Byung-woo), which became his final song during the second successful season of *High School Rappers* in 2017. In this song, the listener recognizes that the enmity and negation that reverberate through the repetitive holler of "전혀" (jeonhyeo, which literally means "not at all") also find its assonant rhyme with "저녁" (jeonyeok, which means "evening"). Both words are dark, but through this darkness the rap exhibits a strong sense of defiance. Vinxen, then a seventeen year-old high school rapper, is sliding away from the bifurcated condition that pits him against the socio-economic system. It really is he who is to blame for not being happy and for also being stuck in a basement room (jihabang, 지하방), a synecdoche for the condition of Hell Chosun, which evokes a South Korea stuck with a high youth unemployment and suicide rate, a low fertility rate, and a deepening crisis of the middle class that has led to a widening divide between rich and poor.[24] Rather than blaming the system that has pushed him to the edge of suicide and his mother into long hours of servitude at a convenience store, Vinxen creates an interior monologue between his alienated self and the putative

form of the other who must stand in as his snickering friends in a Kakao talk chat-room. However, as he continues his struggles with his deep fear of suicide, his anxiety and fear deepen.

Along with peer bullying and economic deprivation, it is filial piety that pressures Vinxen constantly to admit that he is guilty. And here, it is the Confucian filial piety that played a big part to help create a psychological ghetto that in some ways reminds us of the simple truth that ghettos are created not only physically and geographically, but also psychologically and within family relations. One of the arguments that John Lie makes in his *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* is that the disappearance of Chosŏn-era Confucianism from contemporary Korea must bear the overriding responsibility for ushering in K-pop. He states that "[o]ne thing is certain: had Confucianism survived and thrived in South Korea, K-pop would not have been possible."[25] Although I would agree with Lie that the risqué wardrobe and sexually suggestive dance moves in contemporary Korean pop music scene may appear anti-Confucian and unchaste, neo-Confucianism is still alive and kicking in K-pop, certainly if we consider the emphasis on collective values among the K-pop idol groups or the lyrics of some of the contemporary music acts. Here, even in the rap song, the sentiment that pours out from Vinxen's song, a young man who has left his home physically, but cannot leave it psychologically, is Confucian shame or guilt. The line of "I am both grateful and sick and to my father I am sorry" is then followed a little later by the following:

> I'm gonna make money so that my mom won't need to work
> at a 7-11 no more
> So that she could retire in the countryside that she loves
> It's a promise I gotta keep
> But I ain't sure that I can keep that promise
> It's a promise I gotta keep
> But I ain't sure that I can keep that promise."[26]

The repeated lines of a promise to his mother that he "needs to keep" but he "ain't sure that [he] can keep" intensify the guilt the teenager

rapper feels toward his mother who spends day and night working at a convenience store. In the live version of the song, performed for the first time in front an audience during the final episode of *High School Rapper*,[27] the producers of the show chose to exploit this melodramatic tension that exists between the rebellious son who has chosen to drop out of high school and run away from home and his working class parents who have been the object of both his frustration and remorse. Several times the camera cuts to a reaction shot of Vinxen's parents who cannot hold back their tears while Vinxen sings his song. Especially the lines where Vinxen raps about his promise of an early retirement for his struggling mother that he may or may not be able to keep creates one of the rare perfect moments in television that sentimentalizes the mind of a young tough Korean rapper through the conventions of an enduringly strong filial piety.

One of the most prominent contemporary literary theories is the one proposed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. about "Signifyin(g)" as the double-voiced African-American tradition of word-play that re-articulates Du Bois' double consciousness. Taking his cue from the tales of the Signifying Monkey, which originates in the days of slavery, Gates argues that Signifyin(g) is a "slave's trope,"[28] a trope-reversing trope that is pervasive in black culture, ranging across its music, art, folklore, and literature. Evading the tyranny of metaphor and instead adopting what he calls the rules of *metalepsis* anchored by the play of the chain of signifiers,[29] he emphasizes the importance of wordplay based on "phonic similarity"[30] as one of the Signifyin' "slave's tropes." Sin Pul-ch'ul is perhaps the most famous Korean *mandam-ga*, or a stand-up comedian, of the twentieth century. He was born in 1905 and died in North Korea, after choosing the Communist side during the Korean War. Sin may have lost his life during the purges of colonial-era artists carried out by Kim Il-Sung during the 1970s. One of his popular lines on stage during the colonial era was "men are faced with the problem of replacing the question of asking 'why' (wae, 왜) we live, with one that asks 'how we are supposed to live.' This means that we should eliminate the letter 'wae' (倭, which also means 'Japanese barbarians') altogether from the dictionary."[31] Here, Sin Pul-ch'ul creates a classic word-play that operates

on the basic level of linking two words that contain the same signifier and allows his subversions to erupt through the sound-scape rather than through the sound's meaning. Of course, his word-play undeniably evokes the Korean "slave" who snickers behind the Japanese "master," recalling the Signifyin' practice of taunting the master through tropes during a period when direct criticism of the master was banned.

Despite the fact that we have reached a post-colonial, post-poetic, and even post-epistolary epoch, the phonic similarity based on such Signifyin' reaches also a new level of sophistication in Vinxen's Kakao talkscape rap song, "Not at All," which interrogates and questions both the linguistic privilege of English and Vinxen's street credibility: "Hey you've worked hard, but since you are now popular and could make money on your own, you must now be happy, but [I am] not at all, sheeet." Vinxen suddenly shifts from the perspective of his friend/fan probably snickering over a chat and re-authenticates his own personal perspective with an insistence of "not at all, sheeet." Vinxen creatively mixes up the onomatopoeic sound of the 'sheeet' in Korean that refers to "shush" and the vulgar profanity of "shit" in English, which refers to "rubbish." Between the sound of Korean "shush" and the sound of English "shit," Vinxen is able to find a new voice that both mediates between the two languages and undermines the fixed, rigid meaning of the two that *both* signify *condescension.* The clash between these two forms of "sheeet" creates an opening that allows the opposite meaning of silence to emerge. During Vinxen's live concert, the young teenager crowd breaks out by yelling "kaekkul" (fucking good—also a Kakao talk-scape idiom) that overwhelms and even silences Vinxen's rap of "sheeet" in an act of defiance that strongly identifies with Vinxen's street and "black" (흙수저) identity.[32] His simple dexterous usage of "sheeet" helps Vinxen to reach beyond the ordinary fixtures of a singular language or meaning. This is a rare joyous occasion where an off-line public celebration of an online subculture based on communal sharing of wordplay and rap can be documented.[33]

Two Turntables and a Microphone

Often cited in the history of hip-hop is the meaningfulness of the phrase "two turntables and a microphone" when describing the birth of rap music. Often overlooked is the truth that hip-hop grew out of change in the tastes of a public that no longer wanted music driven by melodies. If previous eras of pop music, dominated by such performers as the Beatles, the Eagles, and Billy Joel, saw as mandatory the figure of the singer-songwriter whose inspirations came through vivid melodies, by the late 1980s, the beats and the language of the street had come to headline the music scene. Melody-driven music was relegated to the background as DJs needed more intensified loops of repetitive beats that could get the crowds to dance in the clubs. Techno beats and funky repetitive rhythms began to dominate the 1970s and soon, under glitzy discotheque lights, melody-driven music by human voices grew cumbersome and quaint. Through the microphone, one would need from the human voice not a song, but a thumping rap that matched the rhythm of raw shrieks, scratches on the records, and powerful bars from guitars and instrumental beats sampled together simply to *not* distract it from the dance.

Hip-hop was born at a time when the distinction between the "authentic" and the "copy" had begun to fade, and made a praxis out of a postmodern theoretical discourse that blurred the gap between consumption and creation and, consequently, between the original and its simulacrum. Is Korean hip-hop—imported from the U.S.—a translation, a plagiarized text, or an act of mimicry? It is probably all of the above, but that is to say, it is no more of a translation, a plagiarism, or an act of mimicry than the rap produced in Compton or in the Bronx. Rap also categorically declares itself as an aesthetic supplement to the "becoming-of-the-world." What is essential in achieving an original text in the era of hip-hop is that an act of authenticity must be added through the re-articulation of the swaggering or posturing "I" of the performer in his or her own linguistic vernacular. The "I" here in Korea has to be derived from a subject that posits himself or herself as a Korean rapper. In one of the pivotal scenes in *Sopyonje*, a film about Korean traditional music of *p'ansori*, the performer Yubong yells, "just you wait! The entire

world will someday be on their knees rapping to our beats of *p'ansori*!" Was this tragic Korean musician, who ended up blinding his own daughter in a desperate attempt to compel her to achieve perfection in the art of *p'ansori*, before dying in the poverty of starvation, singularly and absolutely wrong to blurt out these words about the glorious future of Korean traditional beats? Ought we—right here and right now—to borrow a line from W.E.B. Du Bois in "The Souls of White Folk" to exercise the right to join the jeering chorus to "deny his right to live and be" and to "call him misbirth?" [34]

Dongho, right before he runs away from his father Yubong, asks, "what's the point of committing your life to play that *vulgar* music that everyone hates?"[35] *Or* was Yubong actually "singularly clairvoyant" in predicting that his words (and music) would exceed and transcend the boundaries of his bitterness? Was he actually right in believing that his musical soul would reach beyond the pessimism of the "world around him"? That it would allow Koreans to successfully morph into a "becoming-black-of-the-world"? Traditional *p'ansori* may indeed have died, but a piece of Yubong's music, his ideals, and his resilience continue to reverberate, touch, and uplift—in being enmeshed with the true spirit of hip-hop—many of those who create *both* uniquely Korean and transcendently global hip-hop. In the second to last line of "Sich'a," Woo Won-jae proudly swaggers, "the *noise from the Orient* that everyone used to sneer at is now echoing throughout the entire nation."[36] This proclamation of glory, however fleeting and ephemeral in the span of a quickly delivered rap verse, overcomes the *vulgar misbirth* of Korean-ness and thematically triangulates the personal, the national, and the global. First, Woo is a survivor of several mental breakdowns that resulted in several stays in hospitals in order to keep him from inflicting self-harm. His depression forced him to constantly hide behind a beanie pulled over his eyelids, along with his tattoos and rap verses, and yet somehow he becomes an overnight media star. Second, he is a progenitor of a great national oral storytelling tradition that reclaims the meaning and form of *p'ansori* by flowing in and out of multiple subject positions (the rapper as I, the composer, the student, the dreamer, and even the audience) and by ruling over the multiple temporalities of day and night. Lastly, he aims

to fulfill a global ambition—staving off the insulting stereotypes stirred up by the hatred of those who formerly called him a simpleton or a "mini mic" of the hegemonic American pop culture. Whether or not Woo (or for that matter, Korean hip-hop) could torch the *lamplight of the Orient* once envisioned by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in 1929 for the Korean folk, as a revived *p'ansori* singer rapping to the hip-hop beat, remains to be seen.

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Notes

[1] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

[2] Ibid., 6.

[3] Ibid., 6-7.

[4] As Raquel Rivera has argued, the participation of Latinos and Puerto Ricans was critical in the formation of hip-hop culture in the urban areas. See Raquel Rivera, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[5] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 7.

[6] Ibid., 7.

[7] After meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in a historical summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018, Donald Trump discussed the eventual withdrawal of 28,500 US troops from the Korean peninsula. Following Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s, President Trump is only the second United States president to suggest openly the possibility of pulling US military personnel out of Korea. US forces have been stationed in Korea for almost 75 years.

[8] Kwon notes that television stations and radio stations in South Korea often had to face a choice between AKPM and JCS. See Dohee Kwon, "Shin Joong Hyun's Sonority and Korean Pentatonicism in 'Miin'," in *Made in Korea: Studies in Popular Music*, eds. Hyunjoon Shin and Seung-Ah Lee (New York: Routledge, 2017), 125.

[9] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 192.

[10] Besides the Kwon essay, see also Hyunjoon Shin and Pil Ho Kim, "Birth, Death, and Resurrection of Group Sound Rock," in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, eds. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 275-95.

[11] Michael Eric Dyson has written that "rap music is emblematic of the glacial shift in aesthetic sensibilities." Michael Eric Dyson, "The Culture of Hip-Hop," in *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader,* eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 63. While Dyson here mentions "shifts," he is referring to intergenerational shifts among African Americans and shifts in the economic base from middle and upper middle class blacks to urban poor blacks. The depression of urban communities over the past fifty years and the political demoralization that has impacted the African American communities are what have raised rap music to its present status today. However, perhaps equally important in this shift in aesthetic sensibilities, which Dyson fails to mention, is the fact that the sound of raw beats and the scratches that fall between the beats of hip-hop further devalued the importance of melody as the principal criterion for popular music. One could go as far as to claim that the waning of melodies and the exhaustion of the spirit of rock and roll paved the way for the ascension of hip-hop—new music that was not at all reliant on melodies and instead on the beats of the street. Listening to the latest rap sensation, Kendrick Lamar, for instance, will make you realize that the last hurdle of eliminating melody in hip-hop—the hook—has almost all but disappeared. Lamar's best songs from the album *Damn* (2017), "DNA" and "Humble" are simple, loopy, and perhaps, most importantly, hook-less.

[12] Though the first innovation in Korean rap music is usually identified with the arrival of Seo Tai-ji, it would be difficult to claim that he is revered as the king of hip-hop to the generation of Korean rap artists today. It is because Seo stayed in the pop genre and spent much time as a choreographer of b-boy dance. Even though he rapped, his songs were better known for their soft melodies. In "Nan arayo…" a ballad, rather than rap, occupies the centrality of the song. The element of rap is brief, but certainly the accentuation on the first syllable of A of the arayo…is what announced the arrival of rap in Korea. See Roald Maliangkay's "The Popularity of Individualism: The Seo Taiji Phenomenon in the 1990s" in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, 296-313.

[13] John Seabrook, *The Song Machine* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 127.

[14] Thewesterngirl, "*Show Me the Money* 4 Viewer Ratings Keep On Rising," allkpop.com, July 11, 2015, accessed June 10, 2018, https://www.allkpop.com/article/2015/07/

show-me-the-money-4-viewer-ratings-keep-on-rising.

[15] Lee Woo-young, “Han Dong-chul, Mastermind of Korean Hip-hop Boom,” *Korea Herald,* April 12, 2016, accessed June 10, 2018, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160412000578.

[16] Yi Sang-won, “The Hip-hop Cast Made Possible by *Show Me the Money”* [쇼미더머니가 만든 힙합 캐스트], *Sisain* [시사인], August 2, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, http://www.sisain.co.kr/?mod=news&act=articleView&idxno=29724.

[17] As of May 26, 2018, it has sold over 1 million DLs. It was the best-selling hip-hop track of 2017, topping the download chart two weeks in a row during the early weeks of September as SMTM neared its season finale. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Gaon_Digital_Chart_number_ones_of_2017.

[18] See Yoon Kwang-eun,“Korea’s Localizing of Hip Hop Genre and Woo Won-jae” [한국 힙합의 장르적 로컬라이징과 우원재], *Huffington Post,* September 14, 2017, accessed June 17, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/kwangeun-youn/story_b_17991102.html.

[19] Gray also composed the beats for the song as well as serving as a contracted producer for rapper Jay Park’s label AOMG. After the successful run to the final at SMTM, Woo Won-jae was immediately signed by Jae Park.

[20] See Woo Won-jae’s “Sich’a” (We Are) here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdwEE1mwjOo.

[21] According to Johannes Helmbrecht, only the languages of East and Southeast Asia such as Japanese, Burmese, and Thai have a strong sensitivity to politeness in language usage and within their grammars. Speakers have to account for a variety of social distinctions linguistically. Social distinctions between speaker and hearer may reflect relative age, kinship, social ranking, intimacy, and other social features. See Johannnes Helmbrecht, “Politeness Distinctions in Pronouns,” *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*, accessed January 15, https://wals.info/chapter/45. I thank Prof. Ji young Shin of Korea University's Department Korean Language and Literature for pointing me to this article.

[22] The biggest controversy relating to this matter involved the British translator, Deborah Smith, who failed to grasp on several instances the true object of the omitted “you” in *The Vegetarian*, the novel by Han Kang—and thereby mistranslated them as “I.” See Claire Armitstead, “Lost in (mis)translation? English take on Korean novel has critics up in arms,” *Guardian,* January 15, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/jan/15/lost-in-mistranslation-english-take-on-korean-novel-has-critics-up-in-arms. For a list of mistranslations that include the examples of non-Korean speakers or translators who incorrectly designate the subject behind the omitted “you,” see Wook-Dong Kim’s “The ‘Creative’ English Translation of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang,” *The Translation Review* 100, no. 1 (2018): 65-80.

[23] Dal Yong Jin, *Smartland Korea: Mobile Communication, Culture, and Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 153.

[24] A recent book on this subject is Myungji Yang's *From Miracle to Mirage: The Making and Unmaking of the Korean Middle Class, 1960-2015* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). Yang describes how in Korea "a small number of young people are able to acquire decent, full-time jobs, while the rest become non-regular workers who are underemployed, leading a precarious, insecure life." See Yang, 108. The precarious condition of the "spec" generation, driven to build up their résumés as much as possible, is part of the reason why South Korea suffers from one of the highest suicide rates and lowest fertility rates in the world today.

[25] John Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 69.

[26] 엄마 편의점 더 안 해도 될 때까지 벌고/엄마 좋아하는 시골 가서 살게 해줄게/이 말 지킬 순 있겠지/나 자신 없는데/이 말 지켜내야만 해/나 자신 없는데.

[27] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACnh9zlmPNE.

[28] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52.

[29] Gates also cites Harold Bloom, a literary critic who defines metalepsis as a "trope-reversing trope, a figure of a figure." Ibid., 52.

[30] Ibid., 62.

[31] Song Kwang-ho, "Do you Know the Comedian Sin Pul-ch'ul?" [만담가 '신불출'을 아시나요?], *Weekly Dong-A* [주간동아], May 15, 2009, http://weekly.donga.com/List/3/all/11/87547/1.

[32] Heuk-soojeo means a 'muddied spoon' and refers to people who have not inherited any wealth.

[33] Around 1:50, you can watch the crowd interrupt Vinxen's rap with a chant of "kaekkul." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNK4ip296es.

[34] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 227.

[35] "그까짓 천대 받는 소리를 해봤자 앞날이 뻔한디…" is the original Korean that Dongho spits against his father. Noteworthy here is his lamentation of a birth-right that is already predetermined as "ch'eondae" (vulgar). It is not only his personal birth as an abandoned orphan and as the adopted son of a poor, itinerant musician that led him to declare himself a "misbirth," but also his national identity whose musical soul is tied to a Korea that has had to suffer because of foreign occupations and invasions.

[36] "모두 비웃었던 동방의 소음이 어느새 전국을 울려대" is the original Korean verse of Woo. Woo Won-jae is actually here parodying the line from Tagore's poem of 1929, in which the Indian poet declared that Korea was the "lamp of the East." Tagore's original lines are "In the Golden Age of Asia/Korea was one of the lamp-bearers/That lamp waits to be lighted once again/For the illumination of the East."