

Theorizing Cultural Appropriation: Complications of Globalization and Power in Hybrid K-Pop

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to theorize cultural appropriation using a critical perspective that centers structural inequity and uneven global power by examining the case of South Korean media. This paper argues that cultural appropriation is a particular form of intercultural borrowing that relies on structural inequities of power, whereby a more powerful culture takes from a less powerful culture in such a way that it causes structural and representational harm to the borrowed culture. To clarify cultural appropriation as a particular form of cultural borrowing, I provide a typology of different forms of cultural borrowing before positing six criteria of cultural appropriation in order to challenge and problematize binary notions of borrowing as appropriative or appreciative. This shifts the understanding of cultural appropriation toward one that is multifaceted and complicated by different relationships of power.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, cultural borrowing, neocolonialism, South Korea, K-pop

Introduction

There has been a considerable deal of popular media and online discussion about cultural appropriation in South Korean (hereafter, Korean) media. Audiences have excoriated cultural producers and artists for their commercial exploitation and lack of intercultural competence. The arguments usually rely on a reductionist binary of appropriation or appreciation, which sublimates the issue of structural power into neoliberal questions of individual-level affinity and claims of authenticity. It also unwittingly reifies cultural and racial essentialisms. Furthermore, what is described as cultural appropriation—overt racism, mockery, religious blasphemy, traditional clothing, subcultural styles, and hairstyles—is conceptually loose such that cultural appropriation becomes a floating signifier referring to various kinds of intercultural offense. Popular discourses of cultural appropriation thus elide the matter of structural power, while mobilizing meanings that are slippery in discursive application.

Leaving cultural appropriation unexplained is fraught because accusations of cultural appropriation can generate the reactionary adoption of ideologically conservative alternative explanations that, ironically, often begin with a liberal entry point—culture as dynamic. The logical conclusion, as such, is that borrowing should be unrestricted. The co-optation of liberal views of culture acts as an ideological shield to the cultural objectification, exoticization, and exploitation of less powerful groups from the Global South or historically marginalized groups within a nation's borders.¹ Mobilizing neoliberalism and post-racism as dominant racial discourses,² cultural appropriation apologists argue for universal rules of cultural borrowing, regardless of history and power differentials. A reductive either-or fallacy proposes solutions that favor dominant groups with more power to take from less powerful groups, or it calls for cultural essentialism that closes borders and that supports cultural, ethnic, or racial nationalisms. In an example of the former, when Katy Perry was criticized for her American Music Awards performance of “Unconditionally,” using Orientalist signifiers, she was quoted as asking incredulously, “Can’t you appreciate a culture? I guess like everybody has to stay in their lane.”³ It is important to remember

that pleasure can be intertwined with racial exoticization, fetishism, and harm.⁴ Appreciation is not value-neutral. An intervention, then, is needed to conceptualize and understand cultural appropriation from a structural perspective that avoids the traps of an individual-level understanding of appropriation or its counterpart, appreciation.

As common as the discourse of cultural appropriation is, scholars note that it is under-theorized.⁵ Richard A. Rogers writes that critical scholars often discuss culturally appropriative practices but that they rarely name it as such and even less frequently provide a precise understanding of it.⁶ Similarly, Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint claim that there is little research on what kinds of cultural borrowing and crossings are appropriate.⁷ To the extent that previous literature exists, the papers assume a national framework, center Western nations' appropriation of internally marginalized populations, and mostly discuss it at the micro-level, i.e., individual acts of appropriation. The purpose of this essay is to theorize cultural appropriation by centering macro-level structural inequity, considering cultural appropriation outside of the West, and considering cultural appropriation as it relates to groups outside of its borders. To do this, I use the specific context of Korean media—a media culture that is formed in relationship to the nation's neocolonial relationship to the U.S. and that largely succeeds in a neoliberal capitalist world order led by the U.S. Thus, Korea is placed in a peculiar geopolitical position. Notably, Korea is one of the only nations among the world's largest economies that was formerly colonized. Writing about the U.S.' post-war occupation, Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon observe, "Nowhere was the neocolonial character of the U.S. presence more evident than in South Korea."⁸ For musicians in the post-war years under neocolonialism, they were required to learn U.S. popular music in order to survive in their craft regardless of their interest in it. Kyung Hyun Kim refers to this as hegemonic mimicry, "the recognition of Korean reclamation of both the proto- and post-*minjok* identities that has rendered opaque its national identity, for its very survival, and which has shadowed many of the Korean performances, experiences, and cultural utterances of the modern age."⁹ Although U.S. popular music was learned out of necessity, it became internalized into

the nation's popular culture.

The broadcasts of American Forces Korea Network (AFKN) programming over South Korean airwaves imprinted Americanness into Korea's music culture.¹⁰ In other words, Koreans learned and adapted to U.S. popular culture because of the asymmetrical power relations formed in neocolonialism, including the style and aesthetics of Black American performers. Although it is certainly the case that individual performers gained agency as well as performative and consumptive pleasure, the point is largely about the *structurally* involuntary nature of this hybrid incorporation. As Rogers argues, (involuntary) participation within cultural appropriation and under hegemonic regimes does not render it unproblematic. For instance, as he notes, colonized locals performing for tourists can both benefit the individual performer but also be a form of degradation within an economic system that provides few choices to convert labor into capital.¹¹ If the U.S. has power over Korea—economically, politically, culturally—including in its representations of racially marginalized groups, and if Koreans adapt and want to embody and perform cultural practices presented to it, then what is the nature of this act? The U.S. exerted its power over Koreans to accept and internalize its images while also controlling how Koreans can use these images. Yet it is also true that if Koreans reinforce problematic images of Black Americans that it has received through the U.S. popular media, a commercial entity centered on a White audience,¹² then Korea also participates in the marginalization of Black Americans. Further complicating matters, Black American performers are advantaged by the U.S.' dominant geopolitical position. As such, questions of cultural appropriation are complicated because geopolitical structural power is ambivalent and contradictory.

During the "Forum on Integrating Media Literacy," which was organized by the U.S. Department of State and Partners of the Americas, I witnessed two Black American grant recipients discuss how they used a large grant to teach hip hop—music and dance—to adolescents and children in South and Central Asia. Celebrated as cultural diplomacy, the State Department's goal was clear—to use hip hop as a way of extending the U.S.' soft power. In this case, if Pakistani youth learn hip

hop, as intended, and perform it for commercial purposes, they may be accused of cultural appropriation because a vital element of Black American culture has been taken out of its U.S. context and commodified by Pakistani youth, who are not likely to understand the history of Black oppression in the U.S. Yet they would have learned it through the U.S.' extension of its cultural self, arguably a form of cultural imperialism.¹³ So, how should cultural borrowing and adaptation be understood when a marginalized group's culture is used as a form of soft power which constitutes a form of neo-imperialism that reinforces and maintains a U.S.-led world order? At the individual level, performing hip hop may be argued to be cultural appropriation, especially if commercially rewarded, while at the macro level, performing hip hop extends and reinforces U.S. cultural influence.

To contribute to the purpose of clarifying cultural appropriation, this paper argues for a conceptualization of cultural appropriation that is understood from a macro-level perspective. I begin with a clarification of different types of cultural borrowing in order to differentiate cultural appropriation from other forms of cultural borrowing. I then argue for a structural level understanding of cultural appropriation, a move that is necessary to avoid reductionist and essentialist claims. Finally, I conclude by outlining a set of implications for future research in Korean popular culture studies.

Typology of Cultural Borrowing

In the tradition of cultural studies, culture is understood as a discursive field in which ideological struggles are engaged.¹⁴ Culture is a system of signification that produces social meanings¹⁵ and "a body of practices which has to do with meanings and values."¹⁶ Culture is, as such, a dynamic field in which contests over meaning are waged. Indeed, simplistic proclamations of acceptable and unacceptable actions, beliefs, and representations are reductionist and ahistorical, not recognizing culture's dynamic nature.¹⁷ Cultural essentialism is belied by the millennia of cultural interactions between neighboring and distant nations and peoples such that there is no "pure" culture that is unshaped

by interactions with people from other societies.¹⁸ At the other extreme is the unproblematic valorization of cultural interactions without taking into consideration societal asymmetries. Culture and discourse are created in relation to apparatuses of power.¹⁹ It is important to remember that culture is always embedded in politics, formal and informal, as a struggle for power and resources.²⁰ The form in which culture is articulated is rooted in social and material conditions.²¹ In modern, global society, Marwan Kraidy argues that although cultures are necessarily marked by hybridity, it comes about in uneven ways that advantage the global power of the West, especially the U.S., over the rest of the world.²² Cultural borrowing is shaped by power, ranging from “theft” and exploitation to subversive acts of mocking imitation, yet it is critical to remember that the subversive is, by its nature, never as powerful as the dominant, so it is necessary to not reproduce false equivalences when considering acts of borrowing. It should also be noted that claims of unequal global and between-group power are specific to this particular conjuncture. Culture and power are always in tension, and future decades may see new dynamics of power that could shift the nature of who benefits from cultural appropriation.

For now, I take up the call of Lenard and Balint to differentiate types of cultural borrowing by adapting Rogers’s typology of cultural appropriation.²³ So, then, it is important to elucidate different forms of cultural borrowing and clarify how power is enacted in each type in order to differentiate it from cultural appropriation, which I conceptualize as a dominant group’s taking of cultural practices and artifacts from less powerful groups to satisfy the pleasures of the dominant group, a pleasure that comes from taking and owning what is not theirs. I elaborate on this further in the following section but provide a quick explanation here in order to point to how the other types differ. What differentiates the types is not simply the act of cultural borrowing but, rather, the direction of power and the intention of the borrowing. In Table 1, I have created a typology of cultural borrowing, identifying six different types: (1) cultural othering, (2) cultural appropriation, (3) cultural appreciation, (4) cultural mimicry, (5) cultural hybridity, and (6) cultural exchange.

Table 1: Typology of Cultural Borrowing

Type	Definition
Cultural Othering	A dominant group makes racist or ethnic caricatures of oppressed cultural group in order to justify its domination or beliefs in their superiority or give legitimacy to that dominant group's cooptation of the culture of an oppressed group for its own interests.
Cultural Appropriation	A dominant group commits cultural "theft" of an oppressed group's practices or artifacts for the sake of its pleasures; thus, the theft means that the cultural practice is exoticized, primarily profits members of the dominant group, and eventually becomes primarily associated with the dominant group.
Cultural Appreciation	Members of a dominant group borrow from another more marginalized cultural group while humbling themselves as non-experts and elevating the cultural practice and its original practitioners.
Cultural Mimicry	An oppressed group attempts to copy the practices or artifacts of a dominant group in order to gain access to the authority and power of the dominant group in a manner that demonstrates distance from the values of the dominant group.
Cultural Hybridity	An oppressed group incorporates a dominant group's culture (usually that of a more powerful nation with geopolitical interests, e.g., during colonialism) in order to adapt and create liberated identities or more resilient societies.
Cultural Exchange	Groups of relatively equal power learn from one another over time through a history marked by close interactions, which creates mutual fusions while maintaining societal and cultural distinctions.

These six types are adapted, in part, from Rogers's typology of "cultural appropriation" and Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao's dichotomy of appropriation and assimilation.²⁴ Rogers uses an expansive conceptualization of cultural appropriation to include any "use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture."²⁵ Instead of differentiating between cultural appropriation and cultural borrowing, he distinguishes between types of cultural appropriation, which are marked by differences in power. This is a curious choice because as he notes, "In the critical/cultural studies literature, cultural appropriation has most commonly been used to reference acts in which aspects of marginalized/colonized cultures are taken and used by a dominant/colonizing culture in such a way to serve the interests of the dominant."²⁶ Like other scholars of cultural appropriation, I conceptualize cultural appropriation along these lines, and, as such, I read his typology of cultural appropriation as a typology of cultural borrowing, instead. In his typology, he includes four types: (1) integration—internalization of the dominant culture and displacement of their own, (2) intransigence—resistance to the imposed culture, (3) mimicry—pretending to accept the imposed culture while secretly rejecting it, and (4) resistance—adoption of the imposed culture in ways that still allows the native culture to exist. Rogers also introduces the concept of transculturation, which is understood as a form of hybridity that considers power differences in cultural borrowing. As he notes, "transculturation is not, however, a neoliberal licensing of cultural imperialism or an embracing of the radical indeterminacy and antimaterialism of some postmodern theories of culture."²⁷ This view resonates with Kraidy's theory of critical transculturalism as described earlier.

Ziff and Rao, in one of the earliest works on cultural appropriation, do not offer a typology but instead work from a binary opposition of cultural appropriation and cultural assimilation, which is notable for its difference from the usual discursive binary of appropriation and appreciation.²⁸ Arguing against expansive definitions of cultural appropriation, they argue that "producing universal rules without considering fairness obscures the political questions in the moral

equation.”²⁹ Indeed, their dichotomy suggests that cultural borrowing is marked by power—the power to borrow and the disenfranchisement that necessitates borrowing. As the table indicates, I, too, elide usual vernacular arguments about appropriation and appreciation as binary opposites determined by *individual* intention. Instead, I move toward an understanding of structural power, specifically the power of the borrowing group, and focus on the question of whether borrowing substantiates, challenges, or shares discursive power, taking into account the material consequences of such borrowing.

Cultural othering is a broad category of a dominant culture using discourse and representation about an oppressed group in order to advance its regimes of power. The ability of a group to represent itself is taken from the subaltern, and its members are represented as inferior in order to implicitly or explicitly establish the superiority of the dominant group. The dominant group possesses the power to define the other,³⁰ and the other is used to create binary differences that establish socially constructed difference.³¹ Unlike cultural appropriation, which may begin from a place of fascination and interest that motivates the desire for ownership, cultural othering takes pleasure in defining and mocking the other.³² The most spectacular, well-known example of cultural mockery is minstrelsy, which allowed White performers to take pleasure in mocking racial others.³³ These featured mostly Black American stereotypes that justified slavery but also stereotypes like “John Chinaman” that justified exclusion and racial terrorism.³⁴ The representations were instrumental in differentiating White people from racial others, allowing marginalized White ethnics to claim access to shifting notions of Whiteness while enduring as racial stereotypes in the White imagination.³⁵

With racist caricatures circulating through AFKN broadcasts, Korean performers, too, performed comedy sketches in approximations of Blackface, the humor of which relied on racist stereotypes of Black Africans as “primitive.” Because economic and military power are conflated with social hierarchy in the local imagination, Korea could not view itself as superior to powerful White nations of the West, especially as a formerly colonized nation.³⁶ However, it could establish itself as superior to Black Africans by relying on White supremacist

representations that had circulated throughout the nation. Cultural othering of this sort should be considered conceptually different from cultural appropriation because its purpose is to degrade. Mockery takes signifiers of the other in order to establish superiority. Cultural othering is structural because these practices fit larger patterns of structural inequality that benefit the borrower and reproduce further inequity. The examples of racist mockery and racial politics discussed here strengthen existing discursive formations that hierarchically construct biopolitical regimes that define who belongs and how they belong.

Because a full discussion of cultural appropriation is provided in the subsequent section, my focus turns toward cultural appreciation. Generally, cultural appreciation is understood as valuing another's culture and its practices.³⁷ It can be described as an elevation of another culture and its practices and beliefs rather than an elevation of the borrower for the "clever" act of borrowing. For instance, Laure Mapou, a Black French woman, has received affirmative media attention for her study and performance of *pansori*. Mapou performs the traditional folk style while maintaining the standards of its form, but she does not claim to improve *pansori* through her participation as a French national. Although she benefits personally through the recognition and fame she has garnered, she also aids the nation of Korea, which, in turn, features her as a cultural ambassador.³⁸ The primary question about cultural appreciation, however, is whether it operates at the structural level rather than only at the individual or small group level. At the macro-level, capitalist and racist structures discipline actors into extracting value rather than returning it. Perhaps, for this reason, although there may be exceptions, there are no *structural* cases that I know in which cultural appreciation has occurred with a dominant group borrowing and turning interest away from themselves and toward another. As such, cultural appreciation, though theoretically possible, may be next to impossible because contemporary structures push so strongly against it.

According to Homi Bhabha, "mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power."³⁹ Writing in the context of colonialism, he references the colonial subject, who produces

a “partial vision of the colonizer’s presence.”⁴⁰ Mimicry threatens the colonial authority because it relays an ambivalence that resembles the colonizing authority while also casting a reflection that reveals its nature. Describing Bhabha’s mimicry, Lawrence Grossberg interprets it as an intentional misappropriation in which the subaltern defines the colonizer.⁴¹ Along these lines, Kim asserts that Korean performers have exemplified what he calls hegemonic mimicry, “the recognition of Korean reclamation of both the proto- and post-*minjok* identity that has rendered opaque its national identity, for its very survival, and which has shadowed many of the Korean performances, experiences, and cultural utterances of the modern age.”⁴² In Kim’s conceptualization, mimicry can be carnivalesque, criticizing hegemonic power while positioning itself as the object of ridicule. Hegemonic power is subversively mocked while presenting itself as the grotesquely performing jester. The animating force of hegemonic mimicry is the ambivalence with which performers have engaged U.S. neocolonial presence and hegemony.⁴³ It is important to keep in mind, however, that not all mimicry is transgressive.⁴⁴ The oppressed group’s mimicry expresses distance, which can be read as both the space it has to traverse to “catch up” or the cultural distance from and hostility toward the dominant group or nation. Mimicry allows for the agency of the oppressed group, but it also reveals the structural inequity that dictates their relationship. Mimicry is a response, and although it can be subversive, the subversion is partial and limited, as it is not backed by structural and material power. The dominant group remains in power regardless of subversive performances that borrow from and turn the dominant culture against itself.

According to Bhabha, hybridity reflects a transformed identity shaped within the interstitial space between fixed identities of the local, dominated culture and the global, dominant culture.⁴⁵ Because it disrupts fixed notions of culture, hybridity provides the possibility of liberation that can move toward the equalization of power.⁴⁶ Extending the idea of hybridity and liberation outside of the context of postcolonial relations, Crystal Anderson argues that cross-cultural interactions for “post-soul” Black artists is more “authentic” because it allows artists to be truer to their actual selves within a multiracial society.⁴⁷ Anderson,

therefore, understands hybridity as the incorporation of multiple cultures into a freer, more plural self. Joseph Man Chan cautions, however, that hybridity's liberatory potential is constrained such that it does not fundamentally change structural inequalities.⁴⁸ Within Korean Studies, Doobo Shim's groundbreaking work incorporated the concept of hybridity and became central to the theoretical understanding of the Korean Wave.⁴⁹ Shim argues that hybridity—the joining of familiar U.S. media conventions with Korean storytelling—facilitated the transnational spread of Korean media such that the nation has become its own “sub-Empire.”⁵⁰ In this understanding, hybridity in Korean media can be understood as multiply interstitial—between Korea and the U.S. as cultural sites of meaning and between the West/U.S. and the Global South in the nation's geopolitical positioning.

Although scholars argue that hybridity is a feature of globalization that shapes media across the world, the force of hybrid adaptation and change is uneven and favors the more powerful.⁵¹ Dominant nations and cultural groups have few structural incentives to hybridize and, instead, are incentivized to limit hybridity within their borders. For instance, global intellectual property law favors Eurocentric notions of the *individual* genius “author.”⁵² From this apparently neutral law, there are two issues that exacerbate global inequity through intellectual property. First, because of the focus on the individual creator, intellectual property law does not protect traditional folk music, which cannot be credited to a single individual but is transmitted through oral tradition.⁵³ Indeed, intellectual property favors the *written* work rather than the performance or recording, providing fewer protections for authors who are unable to pen a musical score.⁵⁴ Second, as Aram Sinnreich points out in his description of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European origins of intellectual property law, “The classist and colonialist logics of these practices, which essentially provided value for Western elites without crediting or compensating those outside of copyright's protective halo, was rarely if ever remarked on at the time.”⁵⁵ For these reasons, Anjali Vats and Deidré Keller claim, “As a product of modernity/coloniality, intellectual property law is always already invested in Whiteness and racial inequality in ways which necessitate both examination and

undoing.”⁵⁶ White people are seen as more fully able to be true creators, who are worthy of intellectual property protection.⁵⁷ Even in the case of the Korean Wave, which has been facilitated by Western platforms like *Netflix*, production companies are required to sign away their intellectual property rights.⁵⁸ Therefore, the structures of geopolitical power disproportionately result in the hybridization of less powerful nations to incorporate and adapt the beliefs and practices of more powerful ones.

Finally, cultural exchange refers to the relatively equal and mutually beneficial exchanges of cultural practices. Rogers writes that it is the “reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies between cultures with symmetrical power.”⁵⁹ Although this condition of symmetrical power is rare, cultural exchange allows for cultural groups to learn from others and to teach others new cultural practices that help better the societies involved.⁶⁰ Historically, this has been done by neighboring nations through repeated contact, and although debatable, some early interactions across the Silk Road may be understood as cultural exchange despite the greater distances traversed. Cultural exchange may be rare, but it is at least, theoretically and historically, possible at the structural level, but it would be based on the precondition that the nations and their concomitant industries are relatively equal in power.

K-Cultural Appropriation?

In a serious conceptualization of cultural appropriation, it is important to avoid essentialism because cultures are dynamic, not fixed.⁶¹ The majority of arguments about cultural appropriation, however, rely on insider and outsider notions of authenticity that lean toward essentializing claims,⁶² and I would add that such claims move toward the anti-liberal position of cultural nationalisms. This might be sidestepped through the outlet of cultural appreciation, but most claims of appreciation rely on opaque notions of *authentic* borrowing or, perhaps, on *respect* for the borrowed culture. In contrast to the earlier cited articles, Lenard and Balint make two primary assertions: (1) a borrowing culture has knowingly taken something of value and (2) the borrowed cultural group actively contests

the taking.⁶³ It is important to note that their conceptualization is primarily at the group (meso) level and that while they note that unequal power and profit exacerbate the harms of cultural appropriation, it is not central to their conceptualization.

The trouble with this argument is that it only peripherally recognizes operations of power. Their condition that the borrowed culture must contest the borrowing to be understood as appropriation does not take seriously enough the possibilities that the appropriated cultural group has insufficient global power to either be aware of the appropriation or to effectively contest it. This expectation shifts the burden of responsibility onto the borrowed cultural group rather than the borrowing cultural group. A preferable conceptualization moves toward macro-level questions of structural power in the act of taking rather than the efficacy of the borrowed cultural group to fight against its appropriation. As Eric Hatala Matthes argues, “there is general agreement that if cultural appropriation is morally objectionable, it is only objectionable when a member of a dominant cultural group appropriates [elements of culture] from a member of a marginalized group.”⁶⁴ The reason for the lack of objection when a marginalized group borrows is because a marginalized group’s borrowing cannot be cultural appropriation, but, rather, it is cultural mimicry or hybridity. Mimicry may subversively mock dominant groups, but it does not, by itself, produce fundamental differences in structural power. Hybridity, similarly, leads to durable changes in the marginalized group but represents an effort to lessen, but not overturn, hierarchical power.

Eliding culturally essentialist claims, Matthes argues that the harms of cultural appropriation are contingent on systems of domination that speak for and perform the cultural practices of the marginalized. His claims are based on what he calls the “credibility deficits” of the marginalized and the “credibility excesses” of dominant groups.⁶⁵ Matthes’s arguments, however, are largely situated within the boundaries of a single nation and its relationships between dominant and oppressed groups. In an increasingly globalized world, it is important to also consider questions of power between nations. For instance, Mary Antony writes, “Historically, the borrowing culture

stands to gain considerably more than the original culture from this process—a dynamic that prompts particularly contentious and antagonistic responses among postcolonial and previously colonized nations that are endeavoring to articulate a distinctive global cultural identity.”⁶⁶ Consider, for instance, the appropriation of the swastika such that much of the world understands it as a Nazi symbol rather than as a religious symbol in Jainism, Buddhism, and some indigenous cultures.⁶⁷ Additionally, scholars have argued that yoga has been appropriated by Western practitioners, who have detached its specific religious meanings and replaced them with banal spiritual abstractions.⁶⁸ Indeed, yoga is largely associated with upwardly mobile White women. Raka Shome writes, “One might say that the production of the modern White female subject in wellness culture, through transnational engagement with ‘other’ cultural products of healing, is often a production of epistemic violence.”⁶⁹

Therefore, I conceptualize cultural appropriation as a dominant cultural group’s claims on an oppressed cultural group’s practices or artifacts that are taken for the pleasures of the dominant group. The taking produces a displacement in which the cultural practice or artifact is less strongly associated or no longer associated with the subordinate group to which the cultural practice or artifacts have belonged. Power is manifest in the attempt to take, which weakens claims of the subordinate group to the cultural practice or artifacts. This is only possible in conditions in which the dominant group takes. Subordinate groups are denied access to legitimizing authorities or the market to claim effectively or credibly the cultural practices and artifacts of dominant groups. At best, subordinate groups can claim that they have learned a dominant group’s cultural practices. Credit must be given, and expert authority cannot be successfully claimed, at least not on a macro level, particularly between nations. For instance, an individual Korean could be seen as an expert rock and roll guitarist, but Korea, as a society, could not credibly claim that rock and roll expertise belongs to Korea/ns. However, it is arguable that this has happened to the Black American practitioners of Detroit “techno,” which is now largely associated with European nations like Germany.⁷⁰

Cultural appropriation is also understood as being connected to power because it is situated in privilege such that boundaries and hierarchies remain intact. Maeve Eberhardt and Kara Freeman claim that cultural appropriation is an extreme example of White privilege.⁷¹ For White Americans, the appropriation allows them to escape the Victorian constraints of Whiteness⁷² and to desire what is forbidden.⁷³ It also allows White people to gain cultural capital as sophisticated artists, who are so skillful that they can embody the exotic other.⁷⁴ “Appropriators fulfill narcissistic self-enhancement by possessing (‘getting’) an aspect of the exotic.”⁷⁵ At the same time, it allows White people to take pleasure in the other while keeping their worldviews largely intact once the play has ended.⁷⁶ It safely contains the threat of difference.⁷⁷ Unlike cultural hybridity, borrowing does not change the borrower but, rather, borrowing’s boundaries and temporality prevent contamination. This is not to say that White societies are the only ones capable of cultural appropriation—the point of the essay, after all, is to consider its possibilities in K-pop—but, rather, reflects the existing literature and its Western focus.

Considering cultural appropriation’s complexities, it is more useful to understand it not as a binary classification—appropriation or appreciation, negative or positive. Ziff and Rao argue that claims of cultural appropriation are bolstered when (1) it harms the appropriated community, (2) it harms the cultural object or practice, and (3) it wrongly benefits the appropriating group, while offering no legal protection for the appropriated group.⁷⁸ Rogers, on the other hand, claims that cultural appropriation is problematic when there is: (1) involuntariness, (2) inequality, (3) imbalance, and (4) impurity (cultural degradation).⁷⁹ Building on their arguments, I propose criteria for cultural appropriation that can be read as accumulative.

- (1) The borrowing cultural group is structurally more powerful than the borrowed cultural group.
- (2) The borrowing cultural group produces or reproduces stereotypes, fetishization, or essentialism of the borrowed cultural group or its cultural practices.
- (3) The borrowing cultural group is largely unchanged through the

act of borrowing.

- (4) The borrowing cultural group is recognized as having ownership of the borrowed cultural practice.
- (5) The borrowed cultural group loses full or partial control over its own cultural practices and the meanings produced by them.
- (6) The borrowed cultural group is fully or partially unable to profit from its own cultural practices.

Fitting all of the criteria would, then, mean that the cultural appropriation is wholly encompassing whereas cases where the criteria are met partially or incompletely would demonstrate the complexities and ambiguities that arise through global cultural borrowing.

To close this discussion, it is instructive to consider the controversial question of whether K-pop, as an industry, can be considered culturally appropriative because of its incorporation of hip hop or, as Hybe's former CEO, Bang Si-hyuk, has famously described as "Black music."⁸⁰ The argument is that K-pop has profited enormously through its incorporation of musical forms pioneered by and associated with Black Americans without manifesting the authenticity of shared lived experience. One common counter-argument is that the incorporation of hip hop and English represents hybridity.⁸¹ A novel counter-argument made by Anderson is that "K-pop's citational practices reveal a mode of intertextuality with African American popular music where K-pop artists draw on specific artists and emulate their distinctive styles," the effect of which is to "enhance the R&B tradition."⁸² I would argue that the answer is more ambiguous than either explanation because global complexities result in the interaction of multiple epistemologies across and within different cultural fields.

Applying the six criteria, the first points to the complexities of appropriation between nations. It is certainly the case that Koreans are structurally more powerful than Black residents within the nation, but it is not clearly the case that Korean popular music is structurally more powerful than popular music associated with Black Americans, even within the local music scene. Hip hop is popular in Korea and popular globally because it travels on the currents of U.S. cultural domination. Koreans' incorporation of U.S. popular music, including Motown, at the

time, were shaped through the U.S. military's neocolonial domination.⁸³ Furthermore, hip hop is not separable from U.S. culture and its global influence. Indeed, even the claims of Korea's cultural appropriation carry legitimacy and strength because it comes from U.S. racial logics of appropriateness. K-pop's incorporation of hip hop is viewed through the same prism as White American musicians' uses of hip hop, despite the very different contexts of borrowing and different relationships of power. Thus, on the basis of the first criteria, whether or not Koreans are the dominant group depends on the lens through which they are viewed—the domestic or the global—and how they are being viewed—as themselves or as proxies for Whiteness. A global understanding of cultural appropriation must consider the more complex nature of racial and cultural hierarchies because they no longer exist simply within nations but between nations.

For the second criteria, it is arguable that K-pop reproduces and extends associations of youth rebellion, partying, and hypermasculinity with hip hop.⁸⁴ As online critics have claimed, these images extend and reify essentialized and stereotyped views of hip hop and, by association, Black Americans. It is a stylized performance that differs from usual representations of K-pop groups, particularly for female groups. Thus, K-pop can be understood as reproducing, perhaps unintentionally, White supremacy and its racial imagination and, as such, complicity with White racial hegemony in performances of hip hop, particularly when it is adopted as a momentary "concept." As a practice, K-pop performers are evaluated by their ability to perform multiple "concepts"—cute, tough, "girl crush," innocent, and many others. The concepts are understood to be performances rather than "authentic" expressions. Performing a "hip hop" style, is, by convention, temporary, and, as such, it does not change the performers through the act of borrowing. The structures of K-pop make it so that hip hop becomes one of many styles and aesthetics to temporarily take up. Yet, on the other hand, it is clearly the case that hip hop has changed the Korean music industry. Seo Taeji and Boys' groundbreaking performance of hip hop as an expression of youth frustration indelibly changed the music industry.⁸⁵ Having a rapper in an idol group is one of the primary roles, and the style and cultural values

of, at least, commercial hip hop have become internalized across the industry and in popular music. As such, the answer to the third criteria is ambivalent; the borrowing cultural group has certainly changed, but the change within mainstream K-pop idol groups is often presented as identities that can be activated and deactivated.

Despite its performances of hip hop, K-pop has not claimed authority or ownership over hip hop, thus not meeting the fourth criteria. Indeed, Korean programs have featured Snoop Dogg as a guest judge and, in *BTS American Hustle Life*, the group goes to Los Angeles to train with hip hop teachers, including Coolio and Warren G. Even if K-pop wanted to claim ownership, this would be nearly impossible given the structural advantages that the U.S. music industry has on global music. They have, in Matthes's words, a "credibility deficit" as cultural appropriators.⁸⁶ At most, K-pop might popularize a new aesthetic style of "global hip hop" that U.S. hip hop artists and others might borrow from. Considering the fifth criteria, K-pop does not have enough structural power to define hip hop nor to limit opportunities for U.S.-based hip hop artists to profit from their music, although it benefits from its uses of hip hop as practices of hybridization that make Korean texts legible to international audiences.⁸⁷ As such, the Korean music industry profits from its hybrid incorporation of hip hop, but it does not change hip hop's meanings nor limit U.S. hip hop's popularity, profitability, or claims to authenticity. Therefore, the question of whether K-pop appropriates is, at best, mixed. Understanding cultural appropriation as a multi-dimensional, structural continuum allows for the ability to point to problematic borrowing practices without engaging reductive, essentialist arguments about whether K-pop *is* or *is not* culturally appropriative. It can be both simultaneously and in particular ways.

Conclusion

This essay argues that cultural appropriation should be theorized at the macro level for its structural implications. Like the work of previous scholars, this essay moves away from notions of authenticity and cultural purity in cultural appropriation discourses both because

they are historically inaccurate and because they move toward cultural essentialism as well as ethnic and racial nationalism. Instead, I argue that cultural appropriation must consider power differentials because the problem of borrowing resides not in the act of borrowing itself but rather in the claim of ownership, i.e., who gets to “own” the cultural practice or artifact. Because of structural limitations and incentives, cultural appropriation only occurs when a dominant group takes from marginalized groups. Arguing for the reverse is similar to post-racial universalist claims that ignore historical and structural inequities. This is because the dominant group has greater discursive and material power that produce structurally unequal borrowing. A marginalized group cannot credibly claim ownership of a dominant group’s culture, it cannot claim expertise without inviting mockery, nor can it profit by arguing that it has “elevated” the dominant group’s cultural practices. Cultural appropriation, then, is less about *individuals* of one group taking some aspect of culture from another group but more about the dispossession of the culture of the marginalized by a more powerful group.

When cultural practices move across the globe and get used elsewhere, questions of cultural appropriation are more complicated because of multiple, intersecting hierarchies of power. K-pop’s incorporation of hip hop demonstrates these complexities as it borrows from the musical culture of Black American performers, who, though they belong to a marginalized racial group in the U.S., are nevertheless globally influential through the recognition accorded by the U.S. and the West in general, as well as the political economic structures that facilitate the flows of U.S. culture abroad. Yet Black Americans are simultaneously marginalized around the world through the racial structures of U.S. media industries and their far-reaching distribution networks. The mimicry of U.S. commercial hip hop by Korean performers recycles and extends discourses that benefit White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and it allows adjacency to the kinds of racial play in which White performers have long indulged. K-pop’s *hybrid* performances, which are produced from a position of global subordination, reify the global spread of sonic and visual signifiers of hip hop that are mediated by White-dominated commercial enterprises. At the same time, any claims to hip

hop in K-pop are, at best, partial as artists and audiences view it as being able to borrow from but unable to (over)take U.S. hip hop. It can borrow and perform difference, but it cannot displace U.S. performers' claims to hip hop. Although K-pop can participate in problematic practices of Whiteness to consume the other, cultural displacement is structurally impossible under *current* social, political, and economic arrangements.

It is important to note, however, that a structural understanding of cultural appropriation should not mean that individual acts of claiming superiority or ownership of a cultural practice are permissible. Acts of appropriation by individuals who belong to dominant groups reinforce existing geopolitical racial hierarchies. As such, a structural understanding of cultural appropriation does not excuse individual acts, but it provides an analytical lens to see power differentials as the locus of analysis and concern. Also, a structural understanding of cultural appropriation does not excuse the occasional participation of Korean performers in cultural othering, such as Blackface comedy sketches or racist caricatures. Cultural othering of this sort is not only individually loathsome but is also a macro-level concern because it reinforces anti-Black ideological structures. The point, then, is to theorize cultural appropriation in order to understand it with greater complexity with regard to global and local structures, not to excuse individual acts of appropriation or othering.

Acknowledgements

I thank the organizers of the Kyujanggak Symposium, who provided a travel grant to present this article at Seoul National University. I would also like to thank Sunny Yoon and Doobo Shim, the respondents who provided incisive feedback.

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Submitted: November 23, 2023

Reviews Completed: November 30, 2023

Accepted: January 9, 2024