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## Black K-Pop: Racial Surplus and Global Consumption

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TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 64, Number 2, Summer 2020 (T246) , pp. 88-100 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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# Black K-Pop

## Racial Surplus and Global Consumption

*Suk-Young Kim*



*Figure 1. Taeyang channels a black rapper for his 2014 Eyes, Nose, Lips music video. (Screengrab by Suk-Young Kim; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwuAPyOImlI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwuAPyOImlI))*

### Blackface, the 21st-Century Korean Redux

A chilly January night in Seoul, 2014.<sup>1</sup> Snoop Dogg is in town to collaborate with Psy on his latest music video, when suddenly he is visited by a local fan with a blackened face and a dreadlocked wig in an odd homage to the global hip hop icon. Instead of being offended or outraged, Snoop bursts into laughter and posts a picture of himself with the Korean blackface on Instagram with a caption: “Stunt double. Hahahahahah. This nighah here” (Snoop Dogg 2014). This in turn causes an outcry from fans accusing Snoop of being complicit with the racist depiction of his own people.<sup>2</sup> Then rapper Lord Jamar attempts to defend his friend in an online interview:

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1. The research for this article was supported by the Laboratory Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service for the Academy of Korean Studies under Grant AKS-2015-LAB-2250002.
  2. Snoop Dogg’s post invited a heated online discussion about whether Snoop Dogg was “cool” enough to discern the genuine admiration of his fan—an opinion that is met with an immediate rebuttal. For instance, one online blogger noted: “There’s a HUGE difference between dressing up like someone realistically because you admire them, VS dressing up like a black person and then acting like a complete fool in order to insult and degrade an entire race” (DOROTHYADAMS 2016).

When I see an Asian do something like that, I honestly feel in my mind that it's more out of reverence, and trying to actually salute in a way rather than a mockery and as if a white person in America did it. You understand? Their history with it is totally different. (in djvlad 2014)

Was Snoop's fan merely reflecting on the broadly shared infatuation with black culture in the Korean pop music (K-pop) industry, which has seen collaborations with the likes of Missy Elliot, Kanye West, will.i.am, Chris Brown, and Teddy Riley? Was the fan's blackface in fact the embodiment of the desire on the part of many fans and the expressed desire of K-pop rapper Bang Yong Guk to perform perceived coolness as expressed through Korea's perception of blackness? Bang, a rapper for the K-pop boyband B.A.P. who frequently sports platinum blond hair coiffed in the style of a Disney prince, once remarked: "If I could be born again, I'd like to be born as African-American and do music" (in Wong 2014).

So let's cut to the chase. How can we account for the courtship of blackness in the Korean context, in light of the complex legacies of the Korean War and how Korea's postwar music industry was in large part indebted to black music? How can we account for the ideological stakes when the bodies of K-pop performers vicariously play out features of blackness? Is this an effort to create "aural communities of resistance" (Neal 1999:77), much like black artists have done for generations, or is it merely fetishizing coolness, which is often equivocally equated with blackness? K-pop as a music industry rose to prominence over the past 20 years with the rise of high-speed internet connections and social media, and has found a natural habitat on YouTube. Multimedia music that places an emphasis on the striking presentation of the performers' bodies, using elements such as flashy choreography and bold fashion, K-pop is a rapidly expanding cultural phenomenon with far-reaching implications for racial dynamics, as it flexibly accommodates a wide range of racialized expressions to attain desirable coolness.

For a society that has had a long history of upholding ethnic purity as a way to "create an exceptionally rigid and narrow conceptualization of national identity and belongingness" (Lim 2009), Korea has seen the rapid advent—just in the past 20 years or so—of a multiracial society, due to a rising demand for a low-wage labor force, international marriages, and a growing number of tourists and foreign students (Lim 2017). As if paralleling this trend, K-pop fandom has become conspicuously multiracial; although K-pop performers are predominantly ethnic Koreans, K-pop nowadays commands a global audience that is not limited to just a few ethnic and racial categories.

Given the concurrent emergence of a multiracial society in Korea and the global visibility of its pop music since the mid-1990s, how do the encounters between Korean performers and global fans shape the discussions of racial dynamics? How do present practices of fabricating non-Korean racial features for K-pop idols' bodies articulate the memories of the post-Korean War era while creating fantasies of affective attachments for fans of all races?

I critically examine the performance of blackness in the K-pop industry by closely reading K-pop performers' bodies, especially as they appear in music videos, which is the primary media platform for circulating K-pop globally. K-pop emerged in full force as a symbiotic partner of digital technology, thriving in the global music market due to its high-quality music videos that are available worldwide (Kim 2018:93–128). Of all K-pop performances, live and mediatized, music videos on YouTube enjoy the broadest circulation and have the most pervasive power to

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reach racially diverse communities. I examine music videos that most typically speak to the racialized imaginaries of the K-pop industry, but not through the widely recognized yet exhausted discourse on cultural appropriation that often deploys the dead-end binary of aggressive West and passive East. As critiqued eloquently by Craig Latrell, the discourse on appropriation is presented “primarily as a one-way phenomenon, something done ‘by’ the West ‘to’ other cultures [...] with Western popular culture pictured as a sort of juggernaut, rolling over helpless local cultures” (2000:44). Likewise, according to Minh-Ha Pham, the discourse on cultural appropriation tends to resort to the reductionist binary of “Western capitalist institution” and “slum,” with the former stealing from the latter, in effect highlighting the disempowered and silent position of non-Western culture (Pham 2014). I agree with Latrell and Pham that the logic behind critiquing cultural appropriation often ends up affirming white/Western dominance, which does not necessarily address more nuanced minoritarian politics between blacks and Asians. As an antidote to these limitations embedded in the discourse of cultural appropriation, I take into full account the complexities of Korea as a particular site that renders itself open to triangulated racial encounters with blackness and whiteness. More concretely, I focus on two closely interlocking perspectives to unpack racial and cultural interfaces between blackness and K-pop:

1. The deeply troubled history of race relations in the US context illuminates one corner of this project, but it cannot articulate the full range of my current study. The US military’s involvement in 20th-century transpacific warfare should be considered in order to survey a racial performance that stretches transpacifically and transhistorically.
2. From arrogating black culture to commending whiteness via corporeal transformation, the hyperproductive assemblage of racial variations in K-pop performance leads viewers to confront what I would term “racial surplus.” Different from “excess,” which is more than necessary or desirable and thereby indicates a lack of moderation, the term “surplus” captures volatile impacts of racialized performance that transmute widely between transracial empathy and alienation, flexible inclusion and exclusion. As an overproduction of oneself in superimposable vignettes and performative variants that temporarily and flexibly attach and detach the bodily features of racial others—most of the time without critical connection, but on rare occasions with genuine empathy—racial surplus presents innumerable versions of selfhood that fragment the homogeneity of the self. On the one hand, the performance of racial variants by K-pop idols and fans has functioned as a visual means of deconstructing racial purity in Koreans, but on the other hand, it has problematically internalized the view that divides races into an imagined order, which has plagued US society and politics.

Considering these two subjects in tandem will help to address the often conflicting impulses of racial dynamics and body politics in the K-pop industry, which is conservative in its replication of racial order and transformative in its aspirations to reach beyond the persistent racial discrimination in Korea.

## Performing Blackness as Racial Surplus

The camera slowly reveals an extreme closeup of a young man’s lower face, viscerally exposing every pore and moustache hair. Saturated in deep blue shades, his clammy skin appears unambiguously dark. As the camera gently pans out, it reveals a male figure donned with the paraphernalia—a heavy gold chain drooping over his shirtless torso and a cuffed beanie layered askew over the fishnet hair cap—that have come to stereotypically stand for the images of urban youth culture in the US, for which essentialized blackness is often posited as metonymic shorthand (fig. 1).

This is the body of Taeyang, a member of the boyband BIGBANG and arguably one of the most successful K-pop artists to date. When he released his second full album, *Rise*, in June 2014, the production team obviously decided to have him channel a black rapper in his music video for one of the album’s title songs, “Eyes, Nose, Lips.” But curiously enough, in one of the

publicity photos produced for the same album, Taeyang transformed into a pale blond—posing shirtless again—under full lighting to reveal a much brighter skin tone. The stark contrast in the skin and hair tones used for the same album makes one wonder why the production team decided to present his body in such a dramatic chiaroscuro.

K-pop performers have an extremely short life span, usually five years or so, from their late teens to early twenties, often attributed to the high pressure of the industry that cultivates the insatiable appetite for newer and younger idols. For idols, this naturally creates an ongoing threat to their own existence, requiring them to reinvent themselves on a continual basis. One dominant way K-pop performers have resisted their fungibility is by outliving their former selves, through constant chimerical changes in their appearance, producing infinite variants. In K-pop, the pursuit of newness has propelled the overproduction of easily disposable selves, and with that has come the proliferation of racially variant selves.

In this light, the notion of surplus deserves critical scrutiny as intricately related to the hyperproduction of these selves. In Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value* ([1863] 1951), the term “surplus” emerges as a result of overproduction by surplus labor, surplus value referring to new value created by workers in excess of their own labor cost. But unlike the surplus value that is taken away from the laborers to solely profit capitalists controlling the means of production, the surplus production of racialized selves in K-pop is not taken away from the performer, nor does it disappear. Instead, it lingers on in the form of digital specters—accumulated memories of the subject in haunting incarnations. The age of YouTube does not automatically turn fungibility into disappearance. Thus, when a blackened version of a K-pop artist becomes a part of the YouTube archive, it will resurface to lead a symbiotic life with a whiteout version of the self, in effect creating something akin to racial schizophrenia.<sup>3</sup> This disturbs Korea's racially enclosed self-sufficiency, encapsulated in the perceived homogeneity of its pure ethnic makeup, which is presented visually in the uniformity of a black-haired and brown-eyed people. The disturbance forces us to confront the hopeful potential for cross-racial collaboration as well as the uncomfortable exploitation of racial minorities, the possibilities of reductive racism together with the generative potential for coalition building. These clashing impulses will be discussed under the rubric of “racial surplus.”

Racial surplus exists not in a conceptual vacuum but in socially legible performances, especially in the embodied performance of blackness. As noted by Fred Moten, “performance in general is never outside the economy of reproduction” (2003:4) and racial surplus can be understood as an inherent part of “the politics of this unavoidably reproducible and reproductive performance” (4). Similarly, D. Soyini Madison locates “the labor of translating the thick ontologies of what black imperatives are” within “the generative forces of performance” (2014:vi). The legibility of blackness performed is located not only in the frozen shots of idols' publicity photos but also in the lived experience of idols' bodies.

As much as blackness is a lived experience whose violence becomes tangible through the workings of performance, analyzing the performance of blackness in K-pop calls for a more localized conjugation of racial politics. Situated in an affective constellation of fear and contempt, admiration and desire, the local perception of blackness in Korea has deep roots in the US military engagement in 20th-century transpacific warfare, by and large as an extension of American military imperialism in East Asia.<sup>4</sup> For most local Koreans, their first contact with blacks took place during the Korean War (Carlisle 1991). The enduring presence of the US

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3. Most prominent K-pop stars have tried out black hairstyles (Kai of Exo, T.O.P. of BIGBANG, Jun. K of 2PM, Donghae and Eunhyuk of Super Junior, to name a few), and their images remain in the YouTube archive to create a stark contrast with the pasty faces and blond hairstyles these artists also frequently adopt.

4. For a more detailed account of black GI's involvement in the Pacific warfare, see Paul Murray's article “Blacks and the Draft: A History of Institutional Racism” (1971) and Michael Green's *Black Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire after World War II* (2010).

army in South Korea in the aftermath of the war (1950–1953) perpetuated the contact between local Koreans and black soldiers.

The racial dynamics cannot be understood outside the gendered encounter. The presence of US forces in postwar Korea created convoluted dynamics between US male soldiers and local Korean men. As neocolonial subjects, Korean men often saw US soldiers, especially black soldiers, as threats to their masculinity, as the foreign military presence painfully highlighted the Korean men's inability to defend their homeland. The most visceral embodiment of damaged masculinity was the growth of sprawling camp towns near US military bases where economically disenfranchised local women became sex workers servicing US military personnel (Yuh 2002:27–28, 212–13). The rapid Westernization and development in postwar South Korea was often problematically conflated with identifying with white privilege, which in turn internalized racially discriminatory views of blacks. These disparaging views at times played out in the pop cultural imagination (Wong 2014) and at other times unfolded as actual racial conflicts where “Korean female sexual workers in service of white soldiers and those in service of black soldiers clashed and conflicts erupted among black soldiers and the clubs that barred their entry” (Nam 2008:146). US segregation was duplicated in the camp towns, but more importantly such segregation propelled prejudice against blacks throughout South Korean society.

This is truly a regrettable history, since possibilities existed for radical empathy among marginal subjects in the imagined racial order. According to Jang Wook Huh, after Langston Hughes briefly visited colonized Korea in 1933, he drew a parallel between the racialization of Koreans under Japanese colonial rule and that of blacks in the US under Jim Crow laws, identifying abundant analogies between the criminalization of the Korean colonial subject by the Japanese authorities and the African American subject by the white authorities: “His response to Korea provides another version of black internationalism, this time alert to racial violence among Asians” (Huh 2017:202; see Hughes 2003). Where would we be, had Hughes's vision for radical empathy been realized?

This hypothesis is particularly intriguing because the foundation of contemporary Korean pop music is in large part indebted to black cultural roots. Take, for instance, Shin Joong-hyeon, who started his career playing for the Eighth Army stationed in Korea. Shin mastered a wide range of black music for his livelihood: “Every time I played, I had to check the audience first to see whether there were more black soldiers or white soldiers in the house so that I could prepare my act accordingly” (in Im 2002). He was a master at playing jazz and R&B, which “he self-taught by listening to the American Forces Korean Network radio station” (Tutor 2013). AFKN's TV stations, which were accessible to local South Koreans, also introduced black dance music shows, such as *Soul Train*, that primarily featured performances by R&B, soul, dance/pop, and hip hop artists, with an occasional foray into funk, jazz, disco, and gospel music.<sup>5</sup> Institutionalized by the presence of US military forces in Korea, these venues contributed considerably to the foundation of contemporary Korean pop.

More notable is the influence racial categorization had on Korean music. The fact that Shin was able to discern a definitive “black music” soundscape leads us to consider what Tamara Roberts terms “sono-racial categories,” a kind of music stereotype that plays around the deterministic coordination between race and sound. Roberts claims that the music industry in the United States cultivated distinctive sounds for listeners to identify easily with certain racial categories:

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5. In fact, *Soul Train* brought not only the black musical influence but also wide-ranging dance styles not seen before in Korea. As Mark Anthony Neal's research has shown, the success of *Soul Train* was “partly generated from the immediate exposure it afforded to many of the newer dance styles within the black community” (1999:121).

[I]n a moment when a white singer could sound black and vice versa, industry workers decided it was important that a listener know the racial identity of a performer and clearly interpret the racial identity [...] Thus, a fixed relationship was reinscribed between racialized bodies and cultural production “naturally” linked to them. (2016:35)

The definitive racial categorization of the soundscape was not only a music marketing tool, as Roberts illustrates, but was also used to reinforce the class hierarchy and taste of music listeners, which in turn influenced music production and the listeners’ future consumption (2016:12). The practice of internalizing white privilege as the normative racial standard in postwar Korea applied to music, and, in this regard, Roberts’s claims about the segregated nature of black music and its marginal status are central to understanding the performed nature of racial surplus; *standard* pop music in Korea was delimited by rock, folk, and country, which affirmed its white sono-categorization when contrasted with the blackness of jazz, funk, and R&B. Although the global popularity of Motown music eventually and gradually blurred these boundaries,<sup>6</sup> the concept of sono-racial categories seems to hold steady in hip hop, which lies at the center of my case study on the performance of blackness in the K-pop industry. The artists’ surplus production of racialized selves holds not only at the superficial level of appearances but also at the level of music production.

Hip hop in Korea, just like in the United States, started out in a marginal position as a music genre, adopted by the urban youth as representative of their subculture. Hip hop’s origins in black urban culture is what attracted Korean artists, who identified with those at society’s periphery struggling with poverty and exclusion. Even though many hip hop artists in both the United States and Korea achieved commercial success, the theme of a precarious existence has remained the central ethos of hip hop. In parsing the working conditions and labor of contemporary black hip hop artists, Tricia Rose used the term “plantation music” as a way to illustrate the vulnerability of the racially demarcated terrain of black music:

Even as rappers achieve what appears to be central status in commercial culture, they are far more vulnerable to censorship efforts than highly visible white rock artists, and they continue to experience the brunt of the plantation-like system faced by most artists in the music and sports industries. Even as they struggle with the tension between fame and rap’s gravitational pull toward local urban narratives, for the most part, rappers continue to craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives, and experiences of racial marginality in America. (1994:3)

Although Rose’s view captures the realities of the hip hop scene still in formation, before it reached the height of global success, it nevertheless speaks volumes to why the genre appealed to Korean artists.

Just like their black American counterparts, the hip hop artists in Korea tend to perform their marginality, no matter how fragile that notion might be, given the global commercial success of K-pop. One way of seeing the solidarity between black musicians and K-pop idols is to trace how both have projected themselves as enslaved by the profit-driven record labels. A “slave contract,” a term frequently used by K-pop fans, refers to the exploitative terms of employment contracts that the K-pop performers sign with their production company—lasting usually 7 years and sometimes up to 13 years—and highlights the performers’ disempowered position vis-à-vis production companies (Kang 2015). Like many hip hop artists, a sizeable number of future K-pop idols hail from humble backgrounds and achieve huge success as a result of the draconian training they receive from K-pop entertainment companies.

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6. For a more detailed account of how black music changed the configuration of mainstream rock and pop music, see Perry Hall, “African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation” (1997:43–44).

The term “slave” calls attention to the historical precedent in the music business: Zack Stiegler illustrates how Prince strategically performed a persona of a slave “to articulate his dispute with Warner Brothers,” whom the artist regarded as a greedy and exploitative force making artists forfeit their freedom (2009:226). While comparing successful musicians such as Prince and K-pop idols to actual slaves would be irresponsible, trivializing the unspeakable violence that defines the institution of slavery, the performative term invites us to imagine the possibilities of seeing both black artists and K-pop idols as mired in the “plantation music” system.

Prince’s strategic performance of a slave persona was problematic, and so is the performance of blackness by the K-pop idols, given their enormous mainstream popularity, which positions them far from the actual suffering of slaves. K-pop bands such as BIGBANG and BTS, whose musical foundations harken back to hip hop and who can sell US stadium tours in a matter of minutes, have all flirted with embodying blackness, sometimes to disastrous effect and at other times to critical and commercial acclaim.<sup>7</sup> But no other K-pop artist embodies the paradoxical marriage between supposed racial marginality embedded in blackness and the mainstream commercial success of hip hop better than Taeyang. In his third digital single album, *Ringa Linga* (2013), Taeyang performs paradoxical layers of racial surplus, straddling the fantasies of racial crossover and the imaginative blending of the supposed peripheral status of K-pop and the black masculine coolness embedded in hip hop culture.

### Ringa Linga, or a Fable about Racial Crossover

An electrically enhanced soulful melody of multiple chords resonates from the dark screen, reading spectators for an arousing experience. The monotony of the two-dimensional screen is invaded by bold white subtitles revealing the artist and his title song, “Ringa Linga.” As the electric melody transitions into trap bass and dubstep (genres of electronic dance music), the opening shot cuts in, featuring male hip hop dancers in a V-line formation, at the head of which stands Taeyang (fig. 2). Behind him and around him, the crew of dancers—all people of color but predominantly black—plunge into animated physicality that features a powerful succession of stomping, chest thumping, and boldly executed waves. Their bodily moves seem to simulate primal masculine forces, and Taeyang appears as the ringleader who controls the flow of movement with a strategically calculated mix of uninhibited wildness and controlled sleekness.

The beginning of the video is shot inside a Venice, California, dance studio that resembles a warehouse, with a garage door leading to a parking lot. The male dancers, all clad in black, demonstrate their bodily fluency in the hip hop dance routine. They perform a series of hard-edged movements in unison, baring the skill the body has to embrace in staging a dance. As Taeyang executes the precise movements, his exposed arms display the constant constriction of his muscles to highlight the physicality involved, his long platinum braids dangling from under his black baseball cap as markers of racial ambiguity (fig. 3). He is marked as nonwhite like the rest of the dancing crew by performing the same synchronized moves while sporting markers of difference—the unmistakably platinum shade of his hair—as an ambiguous sign of racial surplus.

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7. In BIGBANG’s “Dirty Cash” (2006), one of the earliest songs to have been released by the band, Taeyang sports cornrows in a clear emulation of black hip hop aesthetics. Its opening lyrics, written in English, imitate urban dialect: “Hey, hey! Hey, wassup! [...] do you want a dirty money? / Hell no, I don’t want your dirty cash / Why, change your mind, yo bring it on” (BIGBANG 2009). Likewise, another hip hop-based K-pop band, BTS, appeared in a reality show titled BTS’s *American Hustle Life* (aired on the Mnet Cable Channel from 24 July to 11 September 2014 in eight installments), which features the band in urban areas of Los Angeles where the band members are given lessons in the hip hop way of life by the black rappers Coolio and Warren G (Mnet K-POP 2014). The show at times problematically stereotypes blacks as criminals: in one episode, the show pulls a prank on BTS members by having them kidnapped by gangster-looking blacks.





Figure 2. In the Ringa Linga dance performance video (2013) Taeyang heads a crew of brown and black dancers whose bodily moves are masculine and forceful. (Screengrab by Suk-Young Kim; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ho1y-4mXIL0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ho1y-4mXIL0))

If the equivocal racial dynamics have merely been hinted at in this dance version, then they become even more puzzling in a full music video rendition of “Ringa Linga” released on YouTube two days later.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to the dance version, which bares naked the labor performed by the bodies of color to entertain the audience, the music video presents a peculiar counterpoint. The opening sequence captures the silhouette of Taeyang standing on a crane against the blazing sunset in some harsh landscape reminiscent of industrial wastelands, such as Carson, California, or Gary, Indiana (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> The scene immediately cuts to an interior space flooded by cool blue shade, at the center of which stands Taeyang, clad in a sleek black designer outfit with a thick gold chain (fig. 5). But the most noticeable element is his platinum blond hairdo, which shimmers dramatically against the blue palette of the



Figure 3. Taeyang’s platinum braids contribute to his racial ambiguity. On the one hand, he positions himself as one of the black dancers, while on the other hand, he marks himself as racially different. Ringa Linga dance performance video (2013). (Screengrab by Suk-Young Kim; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ho1y-4mXIL0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ho1y-4mXIL0))

8. It is a well-established convention in the K-pop industry to release two music video versions of the same song—one dedicated to featuring dance and choreography without any dramatization (often referred to as the “dance version”) and the other featuring full costumes and set, which is what the full music video conventionally features (simply referred to as the “music video”). For instance, the dance version of “Ringa Linga” was posted on YouTube on 7 November 2013 (BIGBANG 2013a), whereas the full music video version was posted on 9 November 2013 (BIGBANG 2013b).

9. The music video was shot in a deserted factory in Paju, South Korea.



Figures 4 & 5. The music video version of Ringa Linga opens with two contrasting images of Taeyang. While figure 4 shows only Taeyang's silhouette, figure 5 shows his platinum blond hair as if to draw the viewers' attention to the contrast between blackness and whiteness. (Screengrabs by Suk-Young Kim; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJfZ69MSluY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJfZ69MSluY))

scene. Unlike in the dance version, where Taeyang's racial identity is presented as ambiguous at best (by sporting platinum braids while positioning himself as one of the black dancers), the full music video represents a body image constructed on the stark contrast between the black silhouette in the industrial landscape and platinum hair. The whiteness embodied by Taeyang's performance eventually leads to the culminating segment, where people of all races—mostly white and Asian, covered in elaborate face painting—come together in one consummate celebration.

The racial variants created by Taeyang in these music videos highlight racial surplus at work, as the ideological ambiguity is built on both the glimmering utopian celebration of the multi-racial society and the perceptible racial hierarchy and discrimination. In the behind-the-scenes video about the process of making the music video and dance performance, Taeyang declared that his main intention was to

create a scene “where people of all backgrounds and races could come together and enjoy themselves as one” (BIGBANG 2013c). But a closer comparison of the two videos discloses a conspicuous distance between the male dancers' bodies of color marked as laboring bodies and the white/Asian bodies as bodies of pleasure and indulgence.

The emphasis on precise work and labor that became the central focus of the dance version dissolves into fluid play, with Taeyang providing the only bodily continuity for the two versions of the video. Taeyang becomes a kind of mediator who shows us how black labor in the dance version becomes the ground on which the utopian play and enjoyment of a multiracial community stands, both literally and figuratively: the dance version was released first to serve as a blueprint of the performance in the music video (dance routines are sporadically featured in the full music video version), exposing the anatomy of labor. The coolness of the multiracial celebration in the music video cannot be built without the difficult groundwork laid by dark dancing bodies.

The centrality of the body as the primary means of expression for black artists has been addressed by many scholars. Stuart Hall, for instance, noted how black musicians and artists historically have used their bodies as “canvases of representation” because it was often the only cultural capital they had ([1994] 2009:379). Although this may no longer be the case, they still live with “the burden of a powerful and indelible archive of images of blackness,” as dance scholar Philippa Thomas put it (2014:298). Likewise, breakdance in its nascent stage was dominated by males and can be seen as “a reaction to the hostility of the socio-economic climate, as crews battled on street corners to claim territory through the inscription of personal identity

onto city surfaces, with freezes acting as metaphorical graffiti tags” (Robinson 2014:311). While the dance video version of “Ringa Linga” plays around these historical legacies with visible signs of dark laboring bodies, it does something more, translating and recontextualizing them within the hypercommercial world of K-pop. Similar to how Halifu Osumare deploys the concept of the transnational body to illustrate how hip hop was exported globally through “commercialization and subcultural networks and subsequently recontextualized and adapted with localized articulation” (2007:16–17), “Ringa Linga” posits K-pop as a global hub where racial order circulates. By deploying black bodies as the main producers of labor for the heightened marketplace of late capitalism and other racial bodies as leisurely consumers, Taeyang performs the highest reflections of racial fantasies—a perfect machine laundering and processing black hip hop culture into a safe, digestible, consumerist commodity for global consumption.

To add gender analysis to the racial dynamics, Taeyang’s muscular body carries a strong statement about Korean masculinity—almost with a vengeance—which has been forfeited in response to historical trauma. As Stephen Epstein and Rachael Joo aptly note, “The current ideological force of this body [the muscular male body in the K-pop culture scene] also responds to a century’s worth of emasculating representations of Korean masculinity arising from Japanese colonial power and American military occupation” (Epstein and Joo 2012). By positioning himself as the leader of the dance crew, all of whom are men of color with highly sculpted bodies, isn’t Taeyang performing the rehabilitated Korean masculinity by commanding bodies that reference black military forces in Korea?

Mired in the vortex of quick production and mass consumption, his body stages a double erasure of history: first, of the transpacific military violence that marginalized not only local Koreans but also blacks; and second, of coolness that harbored “very specific and highly charged connotations of black resistance to both white supremacy and the exploitation of the global capital” (Winnubst 2015:2). Contrary to the notion that “aesthetics and even ethics of cool have deep roots in black US culture as long-standing resources of resistance and protection, [which] always included a pose of ironic detachment” (2), Taeyang’s performance of blackness willingly participates in what Shannon Winnubst calls “alchemically turn[ing] the pain into gold” (2). And this, precisely, is the problem with the heightened speed at which globalization spread as consumption rather than connection in postwar South Korea.

In a strikingly honest admission of where he found the inspiration for the album, Taeyang shared a story of how, during his band’s world tour in South America, he “spent an entire day in a Peruvian marketplace indulging in the Incan designs and styles” that later inspired his artistic output (in Kim 2013). Not shy about being a one-day tourist and a casual admirer of the exotic, Taeyang further shared how the mysterious and fierce nature of Incan culture fascinated him. Just as the vigorous moves of the black bodies in the dance version became the foundation for his playful music video, the perceived spiritedness of Incan culture became the inspiration to celebrate the coming together of different races. The vigor of the people of color, in this context, is akin to what Sianne Ngai calls “animatedness” that “loses its generally positive associations with human spiritedness or vitality and comes to resemble a kind of mechanization” (2005:32). But rather than remain silent victims of cultural theft, the elements of the black and indigenous cultures in Taeyang’s performance loudly disclose the ambivalent position that the K-pop industry has come to occupy—as a mitigator of painful racial violence and a producer of an illusory vision of racial coexistence beyond the black-and-white binary.

Throughout this work of cultural encounters, Taeyang’s body absorbs multiple racial personas by virtue of years of choreographic discipline, body management, and styling that fluidly incorporate disparate signs of race. His cross-racial fantasy is subtle and hybridized, in contrast to the crude blackface sported by Snoop Dogg’s fan. Nonetheless, the different shades of blackness that permeate the “Ringa Linga” videos bring us back to the uncomfortable history of how black entertainment was born out of plantation labor and continues to be so. Through Taeyang’s performance as the leader of the dance crew, the videos also illustrate the uncomfortable reality

where minoritarian bodies have to compete with one another for the approval of the dominant white majority.

Parris Goebel, a New Zealand choreographer of Samoan descent,<sup>10</sup> spent sweaty afternoons in her LA dance studio (13–16 October 2013) coaching Taeyang, who diligently emulated every move of hers as he prepared for the release of this new music video. In the final cut, however, Taeyang made a decisive transformation from apprentice to dance master, positioned to commanding a crew of black and brown dancers. Collaborations across racial boundaries as such often result in the erasure of black labor as well as gendered labor. My analysis here has barely begun to scratch the surface of the complex racial dynamics in the K-pop industry that open up such paradoxes.

## Beyond Afro-Asia?

Analyzing K-pop and blackness in tandem presents double challenges, since both concepts are loaded with ambivalence. Blackness in Korea, on the one hand, is seen as an extension of US military imperial power; but on the other hand, it continues to be equated with the abject race. K-pop is an underdog vis-à-vis Hollywood and Billboard culture, but within the Asian cultural sphere, it is a powerhouse ambitiously striving for global dominance. K-pop is a rapidly expanding cultural phenomenon with far-reaching impact, charting both frequently and less visited corners of the world, gaining traction beyond the youth subculture in the global metropolis as a welcome alternative to the US-dominated music scene.

Analyzing K-pop artist Taeyang's "Ringa Linga" music video highlights the polyvalent complexities of the racial and cultural power relations in which K-pop is mired. At once modeled on racial differences and camouflaging them, the performance of racial surplus in the K-pop world has a double entendre in body politics, allowing fans of all races to create fantasies of affective attachments to idols while denying any actual identification with the idol's body, which is highly manufactured specifically to lend itself to a malleable racial image. In this regard, the concept of racial surplus is steered closer to the affective realm: on some occasions problematically fleshing out the connection between the black slaves and K-pop entertainers, on other occasions equally problematically asserting its superiority over other minoritarian subjects. Blackness as performed in K-pop continues to be both an experiential ground from which to explore generative possibilities for coalitional dialogue and a powerful catalyst for critical thinking about the violence of racial discrimination, which is subdued as forms of entertainment yet still forceful as socioeconomic oppression.

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