

K-pop: Blackness as Dress-Up

The emergence of the Korean music industry—more specifically “K-pop”—in the west has been undeniable since the beginning of this decade. Children and adults commit years to a grueling trainee system in order to become an artist. From a newcomer’s view it’s something we usually don’t see often in North America, therefore intriguing. We’ve had our golden era of boy bands and girl groups—*Destiny’s Child*, **NSYNC*, *Spice Girls*, and *One Direction*—but nothing can quite compare to the uniqueness of K-pop and the rather ugly racial insensitivity embedded in it.

What can we learn about gender and anti-blackness in the Korean music industry through the lens of intersectionality? Within this essay I will dissect K-pop as one example of where the cultural appropriation and mocking of Black people is happening using South Korean media.

Blackface in South Korean Media.

Blackface in South Korea is an old practice, dating back to at least 30 years. As the 2000s come, we start to see a trend of members from K-pop groups participating in this act, usually in the form of a skit on an entertainment show. One of the earliest acts of blackface in K-pop to be publicized was in 2003, *The Bubble Sisters* a four membered group made their debut in the industry dressed in blackface. It’s actually a very dramatic attempt at blackface in my opinion, compared to the more modern instances. One member even has box braids which if not a wig, must have taken hours to put into her hair. Their concept was this simply because “They had thought themselves less attractive than other K-Pop girl bands and decided to market their own ‘strengths’, that is, they perceived their vocals to be as good as some excellent African-American singers, and their looks to be as ‘ugly as African-Americans’”(Han 12). It’s strikingly blunt and racist. But it’s only 2003 and the worst is yet to come.

Black women constantly find themselves being a victim of the ridiculing when all we want is to be “recognized as human,” race and gender interlocking here, (Combahee River Collective). A member of the boy group, *Super Junior* does blackface to imitate Oprah Winfrey.¹ We could ask many questions: Why is it funny? Why do they feel the need to go to the extreme to mock her? It’s unavoidable in a way, our mindsets are always a product of the media that surrounds us and unfortunately anti-blackness is worldwide. *Dooly the Dinosaur*, a popular South Korean cartoon from the 80s works as a good example. Within the show there’s a character named ‘Michol’ who is presumed to be a racist characterization of Black people. It’s not far fetched because of how his storyline revolves around being inspired by Micheal Jackson. As well as being illustrated as the typical blackface caricature. Since it’s a well loved cartoon in South Korea, many people including members of K-pop groups have dressed up as him by doing blackface. Many people try to go on the defense and say that it’s nothing of the sort—pushing the blame to the projection of American racism onto everyone else. Yet, in one instance where a member of the K-pop group *BEAST*, Lee Kikwang, dresses up as Michol it suddenly turns extreme. In most instances where they mock him it’s just usually by singing, considering that’s

¹ https://media.tumblr.com/c7369de43a8027248bd2b1e3a5bc1b08/tumblr_inline_mmzfzq5Jg2l1qz4rgp.png

what his character does in the show. Kikwang however, is prompted to eat watermelon like he's in a commercial promoting it—he obliges and it's a huge laughing stock to everyone there.²

Though most don't know, It's hard to forget where the association between this fruit and Black people stems from, dating back to when "...free black people grew, ate, and sold watermelons, and in doing so made the fruit a symbol of their freedom. Southern whites, threatened by blacks' newfound freedom, responded by making the fruit a symbol of black people's perceived uncleanness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence,"(Black).

Sure, it could be a projection again. But, I refuse to believe that when American pop culture has been spreading like a wildfire for decades.

Founder of SM Entertainment, Lee Sooman said "South Korea has best consumed black music in Asia. Just as J-pop was built on rock, we made K-pop based on black music,"(Lie 357). He was inspired by Motown producing stars in the 60s thus creating the idol system that is so heavily depended on in K-pop today. He even hires Black people to write songs for his groups—much like other companies. Tiffany Redd, a black songwriter hired by SM, says that she only got paid \$66.55 for a song that was generating revenue much more than that.³

The question is: how could people in an industry openly inspired by black people and their music be so accustomed to ridiculing them?

Temporary Blackness.

Something that lingers behind the aggressiveness of blackface is what I like to call 'Temporary Blackness'. In a 2015 episode of a South Korean program *STAR ZOOM IN*, RM—leader of the now widely famous group *BTS*—says that his talent is "talking black."⁴ He then does an impression of a stereotypical African-American man, and everyone laughs. What I think is the most important thing to note here is how when these things are done it's always for comedic reasons. In their world, the ability to act/talk Black is merely nothing but a funny talent you can acquire if you try hard enough. Some K-pop idols go further with language; ranging from saying the n-word to having "a black soul"⁵.

Then there's of course the most common form of insensitivity: culture appropriation. The appropriation of Black hairstyles has been seen in the K-pop industry for decades. Now this kind of culture appropriation wasn't even seen as wrong in American culture until the 2010s really, so it's not a surprise ignorance is in other countries. Note my mention of the Bubble Girls and box braids in 2003, by the 2010s mimicking black hairstyles is booming. Box braids, cornrows, dreadlocks, mimicking the texture of kinky hair—you name it and South Korea knows about it.⁶ Funny enough from my perspective the actions themselves aren't what bothers me completely, it's the fact that they can throw away this persona of blackness any time. It's just dress-up for them, only a concept. These K-pop groups have thousands of fans that will either praise them

² <https://youtu.be/b7DwvvYU94M>

³ <https://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/hollywood/black-songwriter-nct-s-boss-go-accuses-sm-entertainment-underpaying-and-disrespecting-her-539786>

⁴ <https://youtu.be/JbwcjmbcFyY>

⁵ <https://beautyandrace2017.wordpress.com/2017/04/27/im-yellow-but-my-soul-is-black-cultural-appropriation-in-k-pop/>

⁶ https://miro.medium.com/max/1400/1*xYldsdcy_PoznwsoePSuA.jpeg

and throw money at them while Black people are looked down upon everyday. To watch these artists make money off of Blackness when black people suffer the most economically is a harsh wake up call.

What I want to use as my cultural artifact is a music video. Suk-young Kim in his article *Black K-pop: Racial Surplus and Global Consumption* talks about Taeyang from the group *Big Bang* as a prime example of this, "...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." Many African-American artists have done what Taeyang has done decades before him, but it wasn't given the same reaction. Wearing things like a durag, having a chain around your neck and a grill in your mouth is a one way ticket to being called 'ghetto' if you're a Black person in America. "Although Taeyang's intent is to be open-minded, he is appropriating black culture through commoditization. He wants to experience the pain of black people so that his music can be richer, yet in reality, he appropriates the black culture's suffering for his own personal gain. Bell Hooks refers to this as consumer cannibalism which displaces the Other while also denying 'the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization.'" (Beauty and Race).

At first it's hard to process, but this is an industry that profits off of conceptualizing blackness and it's wrong. What can we do about it? Nothing probably, but it's important to know that this is something that's been happening and will continue to. Dissecting this topic through the lens of intersectionality we're able to see that gender, race, and class truly are inseparable even if the oppression is indirect.