Chapter 5

"White" Korean Music:
How a Thesis Rendered Centuries of Culture Invisible

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of K-Pop globally, demonstrated through popular groups like BTS, NCT, or AESPA, K-Pop's influence has also expanded into the West and leads to the question: Can—and should—white people be K-pop idols? This chapter seeks to answer this question by exploring the example of EXP-Edition, an all-white K-Pop group created by then-NYU MA student Bora Kim, who wrote a Master's thesis defending the creation and attempting to legitimize the group. This chapter critiques EXP and Kim's thesis through racial rhetorical criticism, examining how Korean and other Asian performers are both racialized—and how EXP and Kim's thesis erase their racial experiences. The chapter works through racial rhetorical criticism by unpacking concepts such as orientalism, white privilege, and aculturality, a concept that requires more in-depth interrogation. The chapter concludes with recommendations for the future study of intersections with music education and future directions for cultural and rhetorical scholars.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this chapter is to identify how Western content producers like EXP-Edition revise cultural emphases out of cultural products. EXP-Edition (EXP is short for "experiment'') was created in 2014 by Bora Kim. Kim, a Colombia University

graduate student who moved from South Korea to the United States, intended to focus her graduate project on a phenomenon she experienced growing up: K-Pop. More specifically, Kim wanted to focus her research on pushing the limits of K-Pop and who can be considered a K-Pop group (Tan, 2018). The limits Kim decided to push was agency: who could and couldn't be considered a "Korean" artist? Kim's method of materializing and breaking those limits was purposely looking for non-Korean candidates to create a K-Pop group. After months of auditions, the final members chosen for the group were Croatian Sime Kosta, Portuguese American, Frankie Daponte, Japanese-German Koki Tomlinson, and New Yorker Hunter Kohl, none of whom was even part Korean, spoke Korean, or ever even listened to K-Pop.

The discourse surrounding Kim and EXP was shrouded in controversy, with many arguing that EXP represented a new, fresh take for those already accustomed to the K-Pop groups that existed, with even more arguing that EXP's existence as white, Westerners soiled the cultural roots of what K-Pop represented. Thus, rendering EXP as cultural profiteers rather than cultural appreciators.

On one side, a sizeable group of people defended EXP, arguing that EXP was no more appropriation than the existence of K-Pop itself (Tubiera, 2020). K-Pop producer Jeff Miyahara, who most notably had worked with popular K-Pop groups such as EXO, and Girls' Generation, defended the existence of an all-White Western group by arguing that since K-Pop is inherently multicultural, EXP is no more appropriative than K-Pop as an art form itself. He further contended that thinking that K-Pop is inherently only for Koreans is "ignorant, racist, and small-minded" (Tubiera, 2020). Miyahara further argued that those who value the success of K-Pop should be proud that Korean culture impacted the world so much that even Western artists want to replicate it, almost suggesting that Korean artists should be *thankful* for *Western* culture.

On the other hand, there were also groups of K-Pop fans, scholars, and other Koreans who simply disavowed EXP and Kim (Hahm, 2018). The scrutiny of EXP and Kim is typically rooted in how culturally unaware EXP was when making their music, considering the lack of Korean language, culture, or even a prior history of ever interacting with K-Pop. It seemed hypocritical for many fans and scholars that Westerners, who already dominate the global music industry, compared to Asians (who are typically excluded from those spaces), were allowed to enter a music space predominantly created for a marginalized population (Luna, 2019). Considering that EXP members had no training in dancing, singing, or even general knowledge about Korea, it was shocking to many that they were allowed to bypass the intense training systems of K-Pop, considering that even though K-Pop is considered a more accessible industry for Asians, most trainees still had slim opportunities to debut in the genre (Hu, 2015).

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