

## K-Pop and Critical Multicultural Art Education

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### ABSTRACT

As a Korean American, I frequently notice the lack of non-stereotyped representations that are available in American visual culture. So when Korean pop music started to become popular in the States, I started to question what made Korean pop music accessible to the masses. To answer this question, I explored the history of Korean popular music and the complications associated with it. This paper is a critical reflection on how an exploration into Korean popular music highlighted the need for critical multicultural education in the arts classroom.

**KEYWORDS:** Multicultural, visual culture, K-pop, Critical Multicultural Art Education

As a former public school art teacher in a rural county in the U.S., I frequently encountered superficial presentations of cultures. I remember one instance walking into a second grade classroom and seeing a Korean doll in the corner during “China week.” I asked the teacher if he knew that the doll was not Chinese and was, in fact, Korean. He replied, “oh it’s okay, the students don’t know the difference.” Unfortunately, during my career as an elementary art teacher, it was common for me to see multicultural art lessons that misrepresented cultures. This misrepresentation is reflected in many commonly used online resources (Acuff, 2014a) and practiced in the classroom through superficial multicultural art lessons. Global visual culture is becoming more accessible in the United States, which can provide a contemporary learning experience for students when discussing cultures. Furthermore, educators can use popular (global) visual culture to introduce discussions that address students’ personal biases and misconceptions. I will use South Korean (hereafter Korea[n]) pop music as an example of the accessibility of global visual culture, misrepresentation in the art classroom, and the need for critical multicultural art education.

In the early 2010s, Korean pop music, commonly referred to as K-pop, gained significant popularity in the United States. In July of 2012, Korean pop musician Psy’s “Gangnam Style” (Park & Yoo, 2012) was

the first YouTube video to reach a billion views, and subsequently became the most watched video on YouTube with over 2.1 billion views as of 2014 (Ayers, 2014). After Psy’s entrance into U.S. visual and pop culture, *Rolling Stone Magazine* published an article entitled “The 10 K Pop Groups Most Likely to Break in America” (Benjamin, 2012). In July of 2015, actress Emma Stone was on a late night talk show, hosted by Conan O’Brien, talking about her love of Korean pop music, describing the genre for another wide audience. As a viewer, this was an interesting phenomenon because I frequently notice the lack of non-stereotyped representations that are available in our visual culture of East Asians. How then, I wondered, was K-pop able to infiltrate popular culture in the United States without subtitles, translations, or white artists? To try to answer this question, I examined K-pop to understand its appeal with global audiences. Through this exploration, I understood the importance of critical examination for accurate cultural representation. The purpose of this paper is to reemphasize the need for critical multicultural art education that presents cultural identities as multifaceted and complex (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001) through a critical reflection of my exploration of K-pop.

### What is K-pop?

The history of music in South Korea is inseparably tied to the history of Korea (Kim, 2012). The 20th century was tumultuous for the country, to say the least. Within a century, they had the Japanese occupation from 1910-1945, civil tensions that ultimately lead to the division of the country (1945-1948), the Korean War (1950-1953), corruption of their first president from 1948-1960, military rule from 1961-1963 (Kim, 2012), censorship regulations from the government in the 1980s (Lie, 2014) and economic collapse in 1997 (Jung, 2010). The history of Korean music reflected these lows: the Japanese occupation introduced Western music through Japanese curriculum; emancipation brought patriotism through music that celebrated Korean-ness; influence of music from the United States (and others) came post-Japanese occupation and during the Korean War; and finally, anthems of change and revolt heavily influenced by Western artists were forms of rebellion during government censorship (Kim, 2012; Lie, 2014; Russell, 2008). It is in this latter stage, during the mid 1990s, when modern Korean pop music began to take root.

Modern K-pop, as we know it, began in the early 1990s with the debut of Sō T’ae-ji wa Aidül (Lee, 2014). This band, hereafter referred to as Sō T’ae-ji, appropriated Western culture and music, performing in baggy clothing, breakdancing, rapping, and singing lyrics that vocal-

ized “the angst of Korean youth” (p. 616). Sö T’ae-ji’s popularity was a phenomenon that was only possible because of the time in history; before the economic crash, Korea’s economy was still on the rise and more Koreans found themselves with disposable income (Kim, 2012; Lee 2014). Although teenagers were an emerging consumer market in the 1980s, by the time of Sö T’ae-ji in the 90s, they “became a dominant market unto themselves” (Kim, 2012, p. 6). The popularity of the band and its lead singer, Sö T’ae-ji, even changed the cultural ideal of Korean male beauty (Lie, 2014). Sö T’ae-ji did not introduce Western music into the Korean market, but they made room for new styles of music and “made dance music the new normal” (Lie, 2014, p. 62). Contemporary K-pop combines musical styles such as R&B, rap, rock, hip-hop, electronica, and reggae with South Korea’s history, capitalism, and culture “to reflect a distinctly South Korean style and lyrical content” (Lee, 2014, p. 616).

### Appeal of K-pop

K-pop has come a long way since Sö T’ae-ji wa Aidül and the 1990s. “K-pop is not only chronologically but also musically a post-Sö T’ae-ji wa Aidül phenomenon” (Lie, 2014, p. 96), and is now closely linked to Korea’s exports market (Lee, 2014). Sö T’ae-ji wa Aidül may have helped begin create a new norm for Korean music, but Lee Soo Man, founder of SM Entertainment, “was the first to industrialize the star-making formula that defines KPOP as an industry” (Lee, 2014, p. 617). Lee, “surveyed teenage girls about what they wanted in an idol” and with that data, K-pop’s first boy band, H.O.T., was born in the late 90s (p. 617).

K-pop stars, commonly referred to as idols, are “mass produced” to “take over the popular music market as a corporate management system” (Kim, 2012, p. 68). Contemporary K-pop is a highly industrialized product with specific goals to not only commodify the artists, but also to promote national branding and advertisement for Korea’s other international industries such as automobiles, electronic devices, and beauty products (Chung & Lee, 2011; Lee, 2014). Because of this goal of exportation, K-pop is specifically styled to be consumable by large audiences worldwide. K-pop singers have a very polished public image that encompasses their talent and all other aspects of visibility, which include their outer appearance, personality, and image. Through their management companies, K-pop stars go through rigorous training in dancing and singing, and are usually provided a makeover. The finished product is a result of calculated efforts to create stereotyped boys and girls (Lee, 2014) that dance and sing to

catchy tunes in a highly polished, flashy package. The fact that K-pop became popular in the United States was not a phenomenon, but rather, a propaganda machine executing the purpose that it was designed for. K-pop was able to fulfill its purpose of reaching a mass audience. However, the commodification of individuals as products is highly problematic and comes with cultural complications including maintaining stereotypes and gender binaries.

### Gender roles

The gender roles in K-pop are an important part of the public image that makes K-pop stars easily consumable and engaging (Lee, 2014). The stereotypes preserved through K-pop perpetuate gender binaries and reduce male-identifying individuals to a “manufactured versatile masculinity that incorporates Confucian notions of masculinity” (Lee, 2014, p. 617). The male is presented as a strong figure “to be revered” (Hwang, 2010, p. 23) through traditional interpretations of masculinity, a wilder representation of masculinity, or with a Japanese *kawaii*, or cute masculinity. The men in these stereotyped roles are either presented to be hyper masculine or softer with a loveable charm, but never crossing the line into overt feminism.

The other side of the gender binary is the role of female-identifying individuals. If Confucian notions of men present them to be strong leaders to be revered, then females are understood to be delicate and subordinate (Hwang, 2010). Perpetuating that perspective are the stereotyped female-identifying individuals in K-pop who either “[ride] the line between sexualized innocence” or “more recently, sexualized aggressiveness” (Lee, 2014, p. 617). Examples of these stereotypes are especially visible in multi-member bands where each member embodies a different persona that aligns within these constraints; each member plays a role in order to appeal to a wide audience of consumers.

Western stereotypes of Asians are also complicated. For a long time, “the main option available to Korean Americans seeking professional success as popular musicians was to relocate to Korea” (Jung, 2014, p. 54). Media representations of Asians and Asian Americans in the United States have been scant and stereotyped by gender:

While the Asian female is either overly docile, obedient, and subtly sexy or a woman warrior able to overpower men physically and emotionally, the Asian male is either exceedingly devious and evil, or an overly studious geek, poor at athletics, weak, shy,

unappealing to women, in short – un-masculine and undesirable. (Jung, 2014, p. 58)

In this vein, one can argue that Psy’s “Gangnam Style” was as popular as it was because it played into these stereotypes; Psy is a non-threatening male figure whose sole purpose was for laughs. These racial stereotypes prevented a place for Asian Americans to exist in U.S. popular culture. “Korean Americans and South Koreans abroad, many in New York and Los Angeles, witnessed and participated in the very birth of popular-music genres and dances and brought them back to South Korea” (Lie, 2014, p. 60).

K-pop’s history is heavily influenced not only by Western music, but also by South Korea’s history, capitalism, commodification, and limited opportunities for Korean American musicians in the U.S. music market (Jung, 2014). The visual appeal of K-pop bands is easily accessible, but a superficial understanding of K-pop would assume that K-pop was merely an appropriation of Western pop culture with an extra “K.” Without the consideration of the history of South Korea, K-pop can appear to be an appropriation of Western culture without much Korean cultural influence, setting itself up for cultural appropriation from adoring Western fans. At the beginning of this exploration into K-pop, I also fell into this trap and assumed that K-pop was merely an appropriation of Western music.

I lived in South Korea from 1996 to 2002 and then again from 2003 to 2005, the same years that K-pop was really coming into its own. Because I experienced the early evolution of K-pop first hand, I went into reexamining the subject with the preconceived notion that I would not uncover any new information. However, through this journey, I was able to understand Korean culture on a very personal level. My examination spotlighted how much I *did not* know about a culture that I lived in for almost a decade, and the history of the people that lived with trauma. This realization made me question how much I, and possibly other art teachers, assume about the lived experiences of people from different cultures to then misrepresent these cultures in our curricula.

### Cultural (Mis)Representation

Cultural misrepresentation is not a new conversation in art education. In 1994, Cahan and Kocur problematized multicultural materials that favored artwork from a distant past over contemporary works that have the power to “challenge monolithic and homogeneous views

of history” (p. 26). The existence of cultural misrepresentations is assumed by Knight (2006), who discussed the potential of introducing these misrepresentations into the arts classroom as a means of interrogating the stereotypes and biases that they perpetuate and that may be held by educators. Chin (2011) discusses the misrepresentation of cultures in multicultural literature, implemented lessons, and widely accessible multicultural kits and curricula. Acuff (2014a) presents the misrepresentations of online multicultural art education resources to highlight the need for critical examination of these resources as they can perpetuate otherness. I would argue that this misrepresentation of cultures in the name of multiculturalism is superficial at best. To clarify, art lessons that view cultures through a Western lens without the narratives or context from individuals within the culture fail to fully understand the cultural context (Ritchie, 1995) while also using culture, diversity, and ethnicity as markers for difference, which perpetuates racist perspectives (Desai, 2010; Ritchie, 1995). This superficial multiculturalism is visible in art lessons where students have a “tourist curricula” in which cultures are added into the standard curriculum through an experience of food, customs, and artifacts (Grant & Sleeter, 1993, p. 11) such as “Native American dream catchers and African masks” (Acuff, 2014b, p. 68). Furthermore, the lessons fail to address deeper issues that concern diverse populations such as power structures, oppression, and inequity (Acuff, 2014b; Acuff, 2015).

Through these superficial multicultural curricula, students learn that their cultural and lived experiences are spoken for by the “expert” educator at the front of the classroom, and may find that their experiences differ from the narrative that is presented to them from their textbooks. Much like the educator in the beginning of this article, misrepresentations can happen in the smallest moments. As I reflected on this misrepresentation of Korea and my own understandings of the country, I began to consider how else I might have been misrepresenting various cultures during my practice as an elementary art educator. I also wondered how my understanding of artwork from different cultures would have changed if I applied an equally critical lens to my assumptions and biases.

### K-pop and Critical Multicultural Art Education

Superficial multicultural education has a negative impact on students from marginalized communities. According to Acuff (2014a), these lessons introduce other cultures but fail to delve deeper and question the power structures and, at best, only tolerate difference. While tolerance is not always perceived to have negative connotations, it encour-

ages students to accept difference as a necessary evil (Gotanda, 1995) by not fully embracing and understanding those with different lived experiences (Acuff, 2014a). The initial goal of multicultural art education was to discuss differences while appreciating uniqueness (Grant & Sleeter, 1993). Without research, context, and critical examination, superficial multicultural lessons fail to achieve this goal. Instead, non-Western cultures are presented as *others* because the lessons are presented through a Western understanding. Lessons from a Western perspective are a form of colonial appropriation (Desai, 2005) that create a sense of otherness (Acuff, 2016) and perpetuate a homogenized, colorblind perspective (Desai, 2010). Furthermore, these lessons continue the cycle of inequity (Alden, 2001) by failing to address deeper issues of racial inequality (Desai, 2010) and preserving “European imperialist ideology” (Chin, 2011, p. 300). In short, superficial multicultural art education does much more harm than good by continuing to other non-white cultures; it perpetuates the notion that cultures are only skin deep (Chin, 2011) by categorizing non-white individuals as “diverse” and “different” (Haymes, 1995, p. 107).

A better alternative to superficial multiculturalism, I would like to argue, is critical multiculturalism, where conversations around culture challenge our “values, beliefs, and assumptions” (Knight, 2006, p. 40). Thus, we can critically analyze “issues of oppression, cultural subjugation, unequal resources, and the systematic disparities that sustain economic inequities” through artwork (Acuff, 2016, p. 67). Critical multicultural art education is based on the goals of critical multicultural education. Nieto, as cited by Chalmers (2002), provides six criteria for critical multiculturalism: it affirms students’ cultures without marginalization, challenges dominant narratives, complicates pedagogical practices, is intersectional, encourages critical conversations, and acknowledges its limitations. Critical multiculturalism can be practiced by considering these criteria in curricula: educators can begin by critiquing visual representations of people of color (Desai, 2010); include the perspective and narrative of the artist behind the work of art (Knight, 2006); recognize overt and covert forms of visual racism and misrepresentation (Knight, 2006); and confront their personal biases (Knight, 2006).

Critical multiculturalism can be even more relevant when paired with contemporary artists and visual culture from the cultures being explored. Through social media, the Internet, and other communication networks, global cultures have been shared with a wide audience (Shin, 2016). K-pop, Bollywood, manga, and anime are all examples of popular Asian visual culture that are easily accessible to mass

audiences through digital platforms. The accessibility and familiarity of global visual culture can be a means to introduce conversation. Once again, using K-pop as an example, students can be asked to problematize the gender stereotypes and representations of K-pop artists and further examine racial stereotypes and (lack of) representation of Asian Americans in the United States. Representation of Asians in American visual culture often homogenizes diverse Asian cultures as a single cultural group, fetishizes individuals, and highly stereotypes them (Mok, 1998). Many Asian Americans struggle with lack of representation, viewing themselves as unable to achieve the “all-American” look, and viewing each other through the stereotypes perpetuated in the media (Mok, 1998). I, unfortunately, can relate to these statements, having struggled with my (Asian) appearance for the majority of my life and internalizing the racism I felt through distancing myself from Korean culture. However, representation in visual media in the United States is slowly changing. With movies like *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy, Rich, Asians* (2018), we are seeing more visual media that is inclusive in its representation of both the cast and production team. In the instance of *Black Panther* (2018), Africa was portrayed as a continent with multiple, rich cultures, and characters were multidimensional and complex. Critical multiculturalism can discuss the importance of such representation, the effect that it had on viewers, the counter narrative it provided to previous misconceptions of Africa, and can even introduce conversations of possible misrepresentations of South Koreans in the film, demonstrating that there is always room to grow.

The accessibility of global visual culture also opens up opportunities to create lessons based on students’ interests. I remember two of my students from different cultural backgrounds coming to me and pronouncing their love of Korean dramas. Their exposure came from older siblings who had found them on online streaming services such as Netflix. In fact, these fourth graders began to study the Korean language on their own because of their interest in this visual media. This interest is not unique to my students; Korean language courses are becoming increasingly popular around the world thanks to the popularity of Korean popular culture (Pickles, 2018). If students are already interested in a global visual culture, their personal interests can drive an exploration of other forms of visual culture. Lessons can ask students to identify a global visual/pop culture reference and do a deeper study into the subject. For example, if a student is interested in manga, research can be done on an artist, storyline, or on the history of manga. The exploration may create an opportunity for students to make a personal connection, much like my own exploration.

Throughout this exploratory process, the role of the educator would be to encourage students to critically engage with the cultures while interrogating perspectives, language, and forthcoming artwork to ensure that appropriation, problematic language, or cultural misrepresentation will be prevented.

## Conclusion

As a doctoral student, it is easy for me to look back and critique my previous teaching practices, especially my lack of critical reflection when I was introducing cultures in my classroom. I shamefully admit that I did lessons on Chinese dragons and Aboriginal paintings. My teaching practices were formalistic, from a Western European lens with predominantly male artists, and mirrored greatly how I was taught in my own schooling, reflective of a greater trend in art education curriculum (La Porte, Spiers, & Young, 2008). While it is imperative that art educators be comfortable with continuing research and learning throughout their careers (Acuff, 2016), professional development opportunities are not always easily accessible for practicing art educators. Looking back at my experience as a public school art educator, there were few professional development opportunities available to my art education colleagues and I. Most of the professional development was geared toward “core” subjects (reading, math, science, history); professional development for art was rare. I believe that art educators should be provided more opportunities for professional development that highlights critical multicultural practices with strategies for implementation in the classroom.

In this article, I presented a personal narrative of cultural misrepresentation and critical reflection as an argument for critical multicultural art education. Through my personal journey of exploring Korean pop music, I learned how I, a Korean American who lived in both the U.S. and South Korea, was still unable to understand the nuances of a cultural phenomenon that I experienced. I used this example to highlight the importance of critical reflection and examination on the educators’ part while encouraging the opportunity for students to explore global visual culture on their own terms. With critical multicultural art education and contemporary visual culture, I believe that art educators can slowly end the othering of non-Western cultures in U.S. curricula and begin a more accurate cultural representation that promotes the appreciation of all cultures.

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