Cultural Borrowing: A Case Study of Korean Youth in Kollaboration

By Kathleen Ryou

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About the Author

Kathleen Ryou graduated from Stanford University in June 2009 with a B.A. in International Relations and a minor in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. She is currently working in Cairo, Egypt as a legal advisor for a refugee legal aid agency called Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance (AMERA). Having grown up in an area of Los Angeles that was affected by the 1992 LA Riots, Kathleen has always been interested in Black-Asian race relations in the United States. This essay was motivated by this interest and was written for a self-designed Directed Reading. She can be reached via email at kathleen.ryou@gmail.com.

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Race is a social construct – open to interpretation and malleable to the prevailing zeitgeist – that is ever-present in American society and used to categorize individuals. Whether stereotypical or not, there are physical characteristics that are often associated with certain races. Skin color, hair type, and nose shape, among others, are considered to be indicators of which race one supposedly belongs to. The notion of culture is also intertwined into this race dialogue. Certain races or ethnicities claim that a type of food, style of dress, or a social practice belongs to their group. Sushi is indicative of Japanese culture, for instance, and the bagpipe is seen as a symbol of Scottish culture. And though this sparks some controversy, African Americans view rap and hip-hop as elements of their culture (Braggs). This last point is central for my essay. I do not attempt to support or refute this statement; rather, I use it as a starting point and accept it as fact since popular culture seems to also view it as such.

Cultural borrowing occurs when these cultural practices are performed by those who would not be considered to be part of that culture. Caucasian Americans eating sushi, the French playing the bagpipe, and Koreans rapping are examples of cultural borrowing. Reasons vary as to why borrowing occurs, but it is not uncommon. Blackface minstrelsy, in which white actors would paint their faces black to represent black characters, was extremely popular during the 1920s and 1930s and served the purpose of allowing Jewish immigrants to gain a foothold in Hollywood (Rogin 12-16). More modern examples of the mixing and blurring include the film 8 Mile, in which white rapper Eminem uses hip-hop to express

Figure 1
himself, and the less well-known online gaming company called Afro Ninja, whose symbol is the face of a Japanese samurai with an afro and an afro pick (Figure 1).

But when is this phenomenon considered to be thoughtful, good-natured borrowing and when is it unconscious appropriation? By using examples from pop culture but mainly through the case study of Kollaboration, a nonprofit that hosts an annual talent show for Asian Americans, I will specifically analyze why and how Korean American youth groups borrow from black culture via rap music. Though I am critical of the borrowing that takes place, in the end I argue that it can help promote racial understanding if used appropriately and intelligently. It is unrealistic to create and maintain static, exclusive boundaries between different ethnic groups. Borrowing is inevitable, and it can be a tool towards coalition-building among the various groups.

But before I continue, a brief of description of Kollaboration is necessary. Founded in 2000 by Peter “PK” Kim, its mission statement is “Empowerment through Entertainment,” and it works to provide a safe space for kids to express themselves, to get off the streets, and to communicate with their immigrant parents (“About”). On its website, Kollaboration states that it endeavors to “celebrate the vast talents of [the] community and hopefully bring them into the mainstream” (“About”). As an organization, it seems to strive for the validation that comes with fame. But more than just wanting a larger Asian presence in the entertainment industry, maybe Kollaboration desires mainstream popularity so that there are more prominent role models for Asian American youth. When PK was growing up, he states that he only “had Bruce Lee and Long Duk Dong from Sixteen Candles” (“PK”). Kollaboration clearly filled a void for many who were aching for some sort of yellow movement – especially in an American society where
the binary concept of race prevails – given that one man’s vision has now spread to Toronto and four major American cities over the past eight years.

Kollaboration pursues its goal by hosting an annual talent show, much like Amateur Night at the Apollo Theatre, whose previous winners include many African American artists like India.Arie and Lauryn Hill (“Amateur Night”). Kollaboration features guest performers, comedians, and judges, while contestants perform head-to-head in categories like rap, spoken word, dance, piano, and vocals. The winner is determined by the volume and intensity of the audience’s cheers and is awarded a small monetary prize. In Los Angeles, the audience is heavily Korean, but it also includes other Asian ethnicities, whites, blacks, and Hispanics.

BLACK COOL

One possible reasoning for cultural borrowing is simply because black is cool. In the music industry in particular, the predominance of African American R&B and hip-hop artists attest to their popularity and to a “black cool” trend (Elam 386). In his book, Harry Elam refers to a suburban white female who thinks that being black is the trend at the moment; “cool then serves as the ultimate aspiration of social belonging, and blackness is just a means to this end” (Elam 386). This popularity also seems to go beyond the United States: Japanese kids darken their skin with UV rays and in the 1990s they memorized all the words to the opening theme song in The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, which starred Will Smith (“iona,” Wood 43).

Kollaboration’s website features several spotlight artists, and one of them is a Korean rap trio called the Hungry Hooligans, who also refer to themselves as Double H (“Spotlight”). Splitting their time between Korea and the Bay Area in California, they rap in both Korean and English. On their MySpace.com profile, they categorize their music as “hip-hop/rap/hyphy” and pay homage to Michael Jordan, Lebron James, and Tupac Shakur as their inspirations (“Hungry
Hooligans”). In 2005 they performed for a Kollaboration show in Koreatown, Los Angeles, in which the members wore a G-Unit sweatshirt and sports paraphernalia like basketball shorts and an Oakland Raiders cap. One of the rappers began the performance by flashing an H-sign with his hands (“Hungry Hooligans – Kollaboration 2005”).

Just from a MySpace.com profile and a video of their performance on YouTube.com, it is clear that cultural borrowing is taking place. First, they label their music as hyphy, a Bay Area musical movement led by black rappers E-40, the Federation, and Keak Da Sneak. It is characterized by fast-tempo beats and energetic, almost spasmodic dancing; as one person puts it, “hyphy is when you go dumb…when all your energy goes to your head and you just can’t stop” (Reid). However, it is interesting that the Hungry Hooligans would claim part of the hyphy movement when their music lacks the high-energy, catchy beats that are present in other hyphy songs.

Second, they are fans of basketball and football, and don the Oakland team colors and other sports apparel. This demonstrates that they probably link black cool to sports, given the overwhelming fact that many basketball and football athletes are African Americans and that Michael Jordan and Lebron James, in particular, are basketball superstars. In popular culture, sports and music – especially basketball and rap to be more specific – often go together, so the Hungry Hooligans’ choice to wear sports apparel while rapping may be considered to be another form of cultural borrowing.

Third, they flash an H-sign when performing, which could be mimicking two things: gang signs or black fraternities’ hand signals. Though there is no consensus as to when hand
signs became an important facet of black Greek life, “throwing up” signs are now used to show pride in one’s organization (Kimbrough 123-4, 147). Gang signs are similarly used to show pride and to represent where one comes from, and though gangs are not exclusive to African Americans, it is oftentimes linked to black culture in American society. For example, black rap group G-Unit also stands for gangsta or guerilla unit. But because both gang and frat signs are – whether rightly or wrongly – largely considered to be black, flashing the H-sign can also be thought of as borrowing.

Lastly, the group refers to Tupac as an inspiration. Perhaps they feel this gives them rap legitimacy because they recognize and pay homage to a legendary performer, songwriter, and social activist. But for a trio that looks up to Tupac, their lyrics are rather simple and commonplace. In their song “Stay Hungry,” part of the chorus reads “tryin to push this CD to the masses / to make 100 G’s, tryin to cash it” (“Hungry”). In another song entitled “Reminisce,” they sing about their childhood and the mistakes they made:

Never wanted anything to do with my teachers at school
Always too busy trying to be cool
I never gave a stool or a shit about you.
I was egotistical with a bad attitude
But you gotta understand I was young and dumb (“Hungry”).

They then continue to rap about their drunken father, marijuana addiction, and their dreams to play professional sports. The song draws from their own experiences, but the presentation of their experiences is unoriginal. Moreover, rap was a way for many black artists to vent and discuss the larger societal, institutional changes that needed to be made, yet there is nothing socially progressive about the Hungry Hooligans’ lyrics. I do not argue that one must be as talented as Tupac to call him an inspiration; rather, I wonder if he really was an inspiration or if they simply listed him as one to create an image.
Perhaps I am too critical of the Hungry Hooligans. Black music, like spirituals and the blues for example, has become commercialized and is taken at face value now. Many would also argue that a large portion of American music is derived from African American music, and that many are not aware of this fact (Braggs). Younger generations may not know who Bill Withers or Ella Fitzgerald is, so maybe it is asking too much for them to know the historical significance of the call and response, for instance. But beyond music, other traditional aspects of black culture have become commercialized and their meaning diluted. One prominent example is stepping, another tradition associated with black fraternities. 2007 movie *Stomp the Yard* is about a national step competition, but the way it appeals to the audience is by making it a new dance form. In Alicia Keys’ music video for “Teenage Love Affair,” there are several scenes of a group of black college students wearing black clothes and stepping at an AIDS rally. It is conceivable, especially because of Alicia Keys’ popularity, for people to watch the video and simply think of stepping as a cool new dance. Perhaps this is what happened for the Philippine All Stars, a dance group that stepped and won at the 2008 World Hip-Hop Championship (“2008”). Some individuals’ lack of awareness can help explain why cultural borrowing can at times be done unconsciously.

**CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPE**

Cultural borrowing can also be a coping mechanism for some. In American society, Asian males are characterized as subservient, effeminate, and sexually undesirable. Their pacifism is often mistaken to be a weakness and they are considered to be pushovers, too introverted and quiet to fight back (Kim 155-6). Oddly enough, Asians are also known for their martial artists, but the Confucian philosophy and Zen meditation that serve as the foundation for Tae-Kwon-Do or Jujitsu, for instance, still make martial arts a “soft” way of fighting (Wu 5-6).
Black males, in contrast, are seen to be strong, dominant, athletic, and physically larger in size, and through popular culture – especially music and film – this set of characteristics has been reinforced as the desired qualities in a man. By downplaying the negative Asian traits and adopting certain black traits, Asian men can better fit into mainstream American society. Sometimes, black men are also negatively characterized as dangerous and violent, but even this would be considered as a better alternative to being weak. Asian males are essentially using one set of stereotypes to mask another.

Returning back to the Hungry Hooligans, borrowing from black culture provides them an opportunity to show that they are not passive or weak. More than just self-expression, rap – everything from clothes to the performance – is all about attitude. The profane use of language and the baggy, street clothes often push the boundaries and is a form of rebellion. N.W.A., which stands for Niggaz with Attitude, and Public Enemy were especially known for their politically and socially charged lyrics and sparked controversy with every song. They helped usher in a new era of gangsta rap and introduced a new type of “hood mentality” (“The Greatest”). Though these rap groups were popular in the 1980s, their influence lingers and former members, like Dr. Dre, have continued on as successful solo artists and producers. This entire package – the attitude, the confrontational nature of the lyrics, the boldness of speaking out – conveys strength. When someone is from “the land of the gang bang,” raps Ice Cube, “it’s all about survival” (Ice Cube). And even if one’s lyrics are not as violent as Public Enemy’s, rap itself is oftentimes equated with strength.

Rapping, however, does not have to be so extreme and Kollaboration founder PK demonstrates that it can be used comically. At the 2008 Kollaboration show in Toronto, PK performed a stand-up comedy routine and commented on the stereotype that Asians are smart.
He states that an attractive girl is an intelligent one, and then speaks of his childhood and jokingly reminisces about how his mother beat him if he received anything less than an A grade. In the process he also sets new lyrics to the chorus of “Low,” a popular rap/hip-hop song by Flo Rida and T-Pain:

She’s a smart Asian girl
She messes up the curve
The whole library lookin at her
She studies hard
Report card says 4.0 oh oh oh oh ("Kollaboration").

Instead of rejecting the stereotype, PK embraces it and tries to turn a negative into a positive. The interesting thing about this is that he conveys it by singing new lyrics to the tune of “Low,” which reached #1 on last year’s Billboard’s Hot 100 List (“The Billboard”). By choosing a rap song, he shows that he too can rap; it is almost as if he is saying that Asians can be both smart and cool, and that despite studying hard they still have time to relax and listen to music. He is using rap as a way to put a positive spin on something negatively attributed to all Asians.

PK has another stand-up routine, where he addresses the stereotype of Asians as quiet. Though there are Asian American groups like the Hungry Hooligans who rap and choose to adopt certain black characteristics, an Asian American audience as a whole will probably not be very receptive to rap because they are either unfamiliar with the music or do not identity with it. PK jests that it is actually because Asians are quiet that they do not bob their heads to the beat and instead look at each other with blank, confused stares. After a few bars of beatboxing, he begins to rap:

If you feelin me, sit still (x2)
Just breathe, blink, stare, and think
Keep your hands down (x4)
Yo 1, 2, 3, to the 4,
If you think I’m the best just breathe through your nose
Breathe through your mouth
Just breathe some air
To me it’s the same as your hand in the air
Is your hand in the air?
No, it’s down by your side
That’s how I know you were feelin my rhyme
When I do nothing, you do nothing (“If”).

The two PK routines that I have showcased specifically address the stereotypes of Asians as smart and quiet. Using laughter and rap as his tools, PK pokes fun and weakens the stereotypes’ grip over Asian Americans and society as a whole. “We just gotta laugh at ourselves,” he says (“PK”). Though the way in which PK and the Hungry Hooligans express themselves is different, these Korean youth are rebelling against the stigma placed on them.

CONCLUSION

Though a group can claim a practice as their own, sharing and borrowing will inevitably occur. One example is the World Hip-Hop Championship – the very name seems to suggest this. Another is the Stanford Steppers, a student group that includes members of all different ethnicities. And another is Tae-Kwon-Do, a Korean martial art that has reached popularity worldwide and is now an official sport at the Olympic Games.

But there is a sliding scale of awareness and participation. The white female mentioned in Harry Elam’s chapter would be on one extreme: by openly admitting that she is into this “black thing” only because it is popular and that she would probably be following a different trend later, she acknowledges that her actions serve no greater purpose than to make her cool. On the other end of the spectrum would be someone like Anna Deavere Smith. A playwright, professor, and actress, Smith culturally borrows by adopting different personas in her play, *Twilight*, to recount the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. To represent a female Korean storeowner who
lost her husband during the riots, Smith adopts a stereotypical Asian accent (Twilight). Mimicry of others’ accents is usually done to poke fun, but that is not the case here. The performance needed the authority and authenticity that comes with the accent, and it served the purpose of enabling others to understand the Korean perspective during the riots.

The sliding scale also applies to the Korean youth who took part in the Kollaboration shows. Though I cannot comment on whether they were aware that they were borrowing from black culture, doing so was a way for them to feel cool and accepted, and also to challenge the negative stereotypes about them. It is the celebrity and social prowess of blackness that they want to experience. Using rap was one way to try to achieve this, though it is too soon to determine if it actually has been achieved. Though it is questionable as to whether cultural borrowing is a legitimate means to attain mainstream success, I support Kollaboration’s efforts to provide a safe space for Asian American artists to develop.

Howard Law professor Frank Wu speaks of the lack of a Pan-Asian identity, yet Asian Americans’ power will only be a possibility if they join together. PK states that though Kollaboration began as a show created by and performed by Korean Americans – the original mission statement was “Uniting Koreans through Entertainment” – it has now widened its scope to include individuals from all Asian ethnicities. Furthermore, some of the behind-the-scenes collaborators and performers are not all Asian American, including some Caucasians and Hispanics. Wu also discusses the importance of coalition-building, stating that it is foolhardy for any one Asian ethnic group to believe that it can thrive on its own because each one individually is simply too small to achieve that goal – perhaps PK realized this. But on a larger scale, though we all have individual roles to play, “together we have the greater role [to pursue] racial justice” (Wu 314-5). So even though there needs to be a coalition among Asian Americans, it needs to
act as a stepping stone to achieve unification with whites, African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and anyone else who strives for equality. Cultural borrowing, if used appropriately like Smith’s portrayal of the Korean shopkeeper, can help lead to the coalition by promoting understanding.
Works Cited


