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Sarah Keith, Macquarie University

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Book Review:

Hip-Hop and K-Pop

Soul in Seoul: African American Popular Music and K-pop, by Crystal S. Anderson, University Press of Mississippi, 2020, 212 pages, 978-1-4968-3014-2, \$45.54 (Hardcover); \$30 (Paperback).

Sarah Keith, Macquarie University

Crystal S. Anderson's book *Soul In Seoul: African American Popular Music and K-pop* joins a growing collection of works exploring diverse aspects of Korean popular music, including Myoung-Sun Song's *Hanguk Hip-Hop* (2019) and Gooyong Kim's *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls* (2019). What is notable about this book, however, is that it approaches K-pop as a territory of global hip-hop and R&B. As such, it provides a fresh perspective on transnational musical flows. Not only does the book examine how Korean artists have "cited" black American popular music genres; it considers how these music genres are interpreted, and re-interpreted, in global K-pop discourse.

With that in mind, this book opens up the often-narrow field of K-pop research to a readership and scholarship beyond Korean or East Asian studies. While studies of K-pop are increasingly visible in other fields — such as cultural economics, musicology, popular music, and popular culture — there is an enduring tendency to situate K-pop within its own bubble of Korean, and East Asian, music. This is evident in the many edited collections, and conferences, that constrain K-pop into its own territorially defined niche. The book demonstrates that K-pop has wider relevance, and here it is fruitful terrain for exploring the globalization of black American music and culture.

The book is extensively researched and engages closely with existing (English-language) scholarship on K-pop to provide contextual data. The first chapter commences with a short history of K-pop and acknowledges pre-existing discussions of hybridity, globalization, and diplomacy. While nothing new to K-pop researchers or observers, this is nonetheless a solid primer to K-pop for those unfamiliar with the genre and field and would be a useful resource for those teaching in this area. In the second half of the chapter, Anderson draws together contemporary and historical research on connections between black American popular culture and Korea, concluding with some examples of "citational practices" in K-pop, such as melismatic R&B vocals.

While the integration of global music genres (including R&B, pop, and electronic music genres) in K-pop is undeniable, an area that is less addressed here is the complex dynamics of this integration. For example, whether Michael Jackson's influence in K-pop (p.33) indicates K-pop's interest in African American culture particularly, or whether it merely mirrors Jackson's enduring influence on American (and global) popular music. On this note, Anderson addresses debates in fan communities around whether K-pop's

use of black American popular music and its associated styles and practices, constitutes negative cultural appropriation. Instead, she suggests the framework of “citational practice” as “an alternative to negative cultural appropriation, one that allows fan reviewers to determine authenticity based on engagement with a range of K-pop” (p. 40). While it is certainly fair to state that “cultural appropriation is not the only way to describe non-black engagement with black music” (p. 41), the “citation” approach negates a more critical exploration of cultural exchange, and the overarching issue is not explored at length in this volume. While Anderson repeatedly states that global fans view K-pop’s citational practices as “authentic” (p. x, xx, xxii, 5, 22, 34) the idea of “authenticity” is not convincingly defined; is it also “authentic” to non-fans of K-pop? Does K-pop use black American signifiers to confer “authenticity” on itself, and what are the implications of this usage? There is much more that could be explored regarding how and why K-pop uses specifically black American cultural forms, and the politics and power dynamics around this use, however, this avenue of inquiry is concluded early on. It goes without saying that, in 2020, these issues are more apparent than ever (following Black Lives Matter protests in the USA, and BTS’s much-publicized donation to this cause) and although in the press before these events, the book could have considered the wider political significance around this cultural exchange.

Subsequent chapters examine specific K-pop artists and case studies from Seo Taiji to Rain to Jay Park, drawing out the connections between their output and their influences in R&B, funk, disco, and hip-hop. These provide interesting and detailed examinations of how K-pop producers, songwriters, and performers have drawn from black American music and culture from the 1950s to the present day. A particular highlight is Chapter 2’s exploration of the similarities between the production processes of K-pop and Motown; while K-pop’s audition, training, and management system is often compared to J-pop, Anderson convincingly claims that Motown is the more influential predecessor. Throughout the book, Anderson’s extensive knowledge of R&B, gospel, and other African American popular music genres is readily apparent. K-pop music videos, songs, and lyrics are picked over in detail and linked to their US counterparts; for example, in discussing Zion.T, Anderson discerns James Brown’s funk rhythms (p. 109), while her exploration of g.o.d. uncovers their use of gospel-inflected R&B vocals and disco, informed by groups such as The Ohio Players and Sly and the Family Stone (p. 48). These analyses deftly integrate material from online fan communities and reviews, media interviews with relevant artists and industry figures, contextual academic research, and original visual, musical (though not *musicological*), and some lyrical analysis.

In all, the book succeeds in illustrating the deep entanglements between K-pop and African American musical traditions. It would have been strengthened by a more critical lens at times — such as considering uses of black American signifiers in K-pop that were deemed “inauthentic” or controversial by fans or discussing essentialized, commodified, or stereotyped representations of black culture — however, its originality and depth of research are commendable; it will be of interest to a wide readership, and potentially as a teaching resource. *Soul in Seoul: African American Popular Music and*

K-pop sits equally well within K-pop studies, African American studies, or popular musicology.

Sarah Keith is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media, Music, Communication, and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She researches K-pop, Korean popular culture, and East Asian popular musics, as well as the Australian music industries, music and cultural policy, music and screen media (including documentary, film, and games), and music technology. She is the co-author of The New Music Industries: Disruption and Discovery (Palgrave).