9 BTS, Transmedia, and Hip Hop

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The Name in Transmedia Storytelling

Seo Taiji and Boys' single "Nan arayo" (I know), released in 1992, may have not been the first rap song recorded in Korea, but it is still remembered by many Koreans, after close to three decades since its release, as the first Korean rap song they ever heard. Seo Taiji was undoubtedly an icon of the youth culture in the Korean popular music scene of the 1990s, and it was not coincidental that he found hip hop to be the music genre most appealing to the emerging youth in the era of postmilitary dictatorship, eager for cosmopolitan style and sensibility. Ever since Seo Taiji and Boys, hip hop has sustained its popularity in the Korean popular music scene, and most K-pop idol groups today include at least one member who can rap. BTS, arguably the world's most popular group active today, features three members who rap. When the group, initially known for its underdog spirit, first started out in 2013, it identified hip hop as its most influential music genre.

Ever since Elvis Presley and the Beatles emerged as global superstars in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively, pop music has actively exploited various transmedia formats in order to commercialize stardom and sell more albums. Well before Henry Jenkins coined the term "transmedia storytelling,"[1] and in the days before user-generated content (UGC) on the internet – on sites such as YouTube and Facebook – allowed consumers and fans to express their own creative views through fan fiction, the idol musicians of the twentieth century were marketed not only through their music played on radio and vinyl but also through fantasy tales. Many pop artists, such as David Bowie, conceptualized fantasy story lines that would blur the lines between real-life performances and stage personae, such as Ziggy Stardust. Before Bowie, Elvis played larger-than-life characters in movies, ranging from a convicted murderer (*Jailhouse Rock*, 1957) to a biracial cowboy caught in a racial conflict in a Western (*Flaming Star*, 1960) to a boxer (*Kid Galahad*, 1962), and a Hawaiian GI returning from a tour of duty (*Blue Hawaii*, 1961). Not to be outdone, John, Paul, George, and Ringo packaged themselves into Sergeant Pepper animation characters, rode a yellow submarine, and donned enormous walrus and other costumes, all in order to create better points of convergence with their fans.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108938075.015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These dreamlike fantasy characters stoked the imaginations of young consumers beyond their enjoyment of the music of their idols. Although the fantasy tales featured less-than-real scenarios, they became central visual images of cool America and mod Britain and worked their way into millions of homes in the postwar "free world." This transmedia storytelling was every bit as important as the musical tunes themselves, as film, television, radio, publishing, and tabloid culture, and even toy and stationery merchandisers, collaborated with the music industry in fueling the fantasies of consumers who sought to tell their own stories around the stars they adored.

During the 1980s and 1990s fantasy based on transmedia storytelling continued to play an important role in films, and then in music videos; it became popular in the age of MTV, even becoming bigger than the music itself. Music giants such as Michael Jackson, Prince, and Madonna all crossed over various media of motion picture, music videos, television, fashion, and even amusement park rides to appeal to their fans. Albums that were explosively popular with fans, such as *Thriller* (1982), *Purple Rain* (1984), and *Like a Virgin* (1984), were not only supported by music videos and theme park–like stadium tours but also heavily promoted by feature or concept films in which the artists starred (*Michael Jackson's Thriller* video, *Purple Rain* starring Prince, and *Desperately Seeking Susan* starring Madonna, among others). Music was just one element among a confluence of *other* star-making ingredients that were equally if not more powerful in the world of fandom that craved ever more fantasy stories, fashion trends, and viral dance moves.

However, starting around the 2000s, fantasy stories began to wane in the music industry. There are two reasons for this. First, popular television music audition programs, such as *American Idol*, which began in 2002, groomed their new musical talents into stardom by touting autobiographical stories rather than fantasies. After being nearly destroyed by Napster and other free music-sharing services, the music studios needed to regroup, and did so by forging alliances with television and its growing demand for reality content to rebound from its own ratings crisis. Second, the hip-hop industry, which was hitting its stride after several decades of ascent, had likewise taken an autobiographical turn, focusing on rappers' real-life stories steeped in Black urban ghettos, and this emphasis on authenticity became far more important than selling stories based on fantasy re-creations of zombies, virgin myths, and cartoon characters. Although, ironically, the genre of hip hop put into practice a postmodern blurring of distinction between the "authentic" and the "copy" – by narrowing the gap between production and consumption via empowering DJs who endlessly looped, sampled, and appropriated original R&B songs

on their turntables – hip hop also prioritized what Achille Mbembe has referred to as the "becoming black of the world," that is, the postured rearticulation of an authenticated "I" rooted in social hardship and street culture and known for its fights against the establishment.[2] My explanation of "becoming black" here is deliberately complicated, because from N.W.A.'s West Coast gangsta rap to Jay-Z's East Coast hustler rap, the "keep it real" image of hip hop, as marketed throughout the past several decades, is mediated by blurring the line between dramatization and street reality.

Complete debunking of the authenticity argument of hip hop, which stresses the importance of Blackness at its origin, as a bankrupt essentialist enterprise, can often exempt egregious and offensive misappropriation of African American cultural practices from being critiqued. Hip hop became a vehicle for a public art forum on sensitive topics about racism and police brutality around many global urban centers one or two decades after the genre was born in the streets of Bronx during the 1970s. As Andy Bennett notes in his research on hip hop in Frankfurt, Germany, and Newcastle, United Kingdom, what began as experimental street music in New York City in the 1970s successfully expanded to both racialized minority and white youths in Europe. However, even though the global mobility of hip hop has proven to be expedient, popular, and effective, many cases of non-Black localization and appropriation have to be cautiously approached and theorized. Even Bennett argues, after having studied hip hop in Newcastle, a predominantly white, working-class city in the 1990s, that the "use of black music and style on the part of the white working-class youth [in the UK] becomes a particular form of lived sensibility; a reflexive lifestyle 'strategy.'"[3] In other words, without the recognition of affinity with African Americans' struggles, hip hop performed by non-Blacks and minority groups can reinscribe the danger of foreclosing the dialogue with the African Americans who innovated and continue to innovate this novel cultural experience.

Cynthia Fuchs argues in discussing Jay-Z's music video "Hard Knock Life" that the 'hood depicted in the hustler-cum-rapper's video is "a specific and imaginative construction . . . simultaneously diurnal and sensational, depressed and sanguine, a dramatization of the dreams ignited by such an environment."[4] Although the representation of the 'hood in rap songs is inevitably overdramatized, the emergence of hip hop suddenly allowed the American public to see real, unfiltered images of Black ghettos for the first time. Just as the early rock stars mentioned above carved fantasy alter egos from the concept images of their albums or films, many rappers had to shuffle between two identities: an illegitimate street identity and a second identity unencumbered by street reputation. Both Dr. Dre

and Jay-Z play with their real names in songs (Andre Young and Shawn Carter, respectively) as if they possessed multiple subjectivities. These rappers' dual identities are not only self-mocking, playful acts put on by the performers themselves but also punctuated by the historical oppression of African Americans that made renaming a necessity.

Not unlike these American rap stars, about half of the members of the Korean idol septet BTS, which started as a rap group, feature double identities. For instance, RM (previously Rap Monster) also uses his birth name (Kim Nam-joon) when he reverts to his everyday "normal" persona. However, this is where the comparison between Korean and African American rapper self-naming conventions ends. Unlike Black rappers, whose nicknames, dual identities, and near obsession with reclaiming a new sense of self are due to their illegitimate street identities from the 'hood, the dual identities of Korean rappers lack political depths of nomenclature. The self-effacing fogginess, legal caginess, and complexity of birth origin embedded in the naming of American rappers could be traced back to the beginnings of African American history and slavery in the United States, none of which can be applied to the background of the names given to Korean artists. Korean rappers can at best approximate the kind of political manifestation sought by Black rappers' name shuffling, which also subverts numerous binaries, including home versus exile, sobriety versus addiction, and freedom versus incarceration. In American rapper names, what began as a recognition of power enfranchisement and disenfranchisement – materialized in legal troubles, bouts with alcohol and drug addiction, incarcerations, and police harassment – can only be mimicked in the Korean pop world, where the experience and concept of the ethnic 'hood is largely absent. The names of BTS's rappers, such as RM and Suga, provoke swag and cuteness with little underlying substance. Only the rapper members of BTS have adopted stage names that bear no resemblance to their original names (RM, Suga, and J-Hope), whereas the group's vocalists (Jin, Jimin, and Jungkook) have retained at least part of their birth names. The seventh and second-youngest member of the group, V, remains the only outlier, but once again, his name simply stands for a common and trite term, "victory."

The purpose of this chapter is not to raise the specter of the debate over authenticity in relation to race and Blackness. Every ethnic community around the globe is producing its own rap culture and has created its own version of the "Black man." In major cosmopolitan sectors, not only Korean but also Puerto Rican, Indian, and Arabic youth communities, for instance, distinguish themselves from the mainstream corporate industry by producing their own hip-hop music and culture. As I have stated above, the debate about authenticity and the appropriation of the African

American origin of hip hop continues to unravel not only outside but also still in the United States. For instance, during the mid-2010s, pioneering rapper Q-Tip's public outburst of displeasure with the white rapper Iggy Azalea and her ignorance of the historical origins of hip hop exhibited the difficulty of resolving the debate well into the twenty-first century. Also, during a hip-hop panel I moderated in October 2019, when asked how he feels about the strong connection between hip hop and the "criminalized Black body," the legendary Korean rapper Tiger JK refrained from directly engaging with the question, only to show frustration privately, for the question implied that his hip hop was less than legitimate because he does not possess a "Black body." But even he lamented that today's rappers in Korea know very little about the African American origin of hip hop. I wish to ask how K-pop, and more specifically BTS, makes or unmakes its own ethnic identity in a way that becomes emblematic of its hard work on self-cultivation and that may then approximate a connection to Blackness. To rephrase this question, in what specific ways does K-pop propose the sense of "home" (*gohyang*) that African American musicians have used in portraying the complexity of the 'hood that is so deeply entrenched in the visual landscapes of hip-hop expression? If hip-hop sound not only gave rise to the style and music of African Americans but also served to reimagine the 'hood for Black musicians who found their way to the global mainstream, where can K-pop's reclamation of its own 'hood be? Given that transmedia storytelling strategies have paid enormous dividends for BTS, what kind of shared spatial identification has this K-pop group been able to conjecture for both itself and its fans? What interests me is the question of how BTS's transmedia storytelling campaign enables the group's members to solidly link their identities with their fans in order to forge a sense of collective spatial belonging that serves as a postethnic, postnational, and postlinguistic home. What comes into play in these music videos is a manufactured sense of place, ranging from encounters on harsh streets to an alternate-reality universe existing only in cyberspace, all of which is designed to appeal to global fans.[5] In 2015, for instance, Big Hit Entertainment scored big with an image of fictive blue flowers that was featured on a music video by BTS. When these flowers provoked curiosity, Big Hit gave them the name "smeraldo" and opened a blog on the Korean portal site Naver.com called "Flower Smeraldo," which posts random newsletters on the manufactured history of the flowers and, to a larger extent, a sense of cyber habitat for the invented flora.

BTS was the first and only K-pop idol group to "train" in one of the *bonto*s (homelands) of hip hop, the African American neighborhood of Los Angeles, for the Mnet reality-television program *American Hustle Life* (*AHL*). The program aired weekly and had been specifically designed for

BTS. In watching *AHL*, I am fascinated by BTS's self-deprecation and how its members engage almost in self-mockery to project themselves as underdog heroes struggling in the land of hip hop. As they attempt to impress rap mentors from the 'hood, such as Coolio and Warren G, their efforts to earn legitimacy in K-pop history by making a pilgrimage to the *bonto* of hip hop actually expose the impossibility of bridging the gap between K-pop and Black hip hop. After initial attempts to launch BTS as a hip-hop idol group failed, largely because of the different genealogies of the two music genres, the septet moved away from hip hop and took a step toward a more mainstream pop sound. It was around the same time that the group also created Bangtan Universe (BU), a multimedia fictional realm of music videos and short films, books, a game app, and a webtoon. After my discussion of *AHL*, I propose a reading of the images of BU, productively drawing on Kay Dickinson's theory of synesthetic possibility, which refers to the effects of music videos that appeal to the senses of both sight and sound. The sense of visual space that BTS promotes through BU is a kind of neither-here-nor-there fluidity, which can both strongly invoke visual significations open to creative reinterpretation on the part of fans and overwhelm viewers with the force of neoliberal globalization, where every space unfortunately becomes gentrified for the sake of promoting universality. BU, the fictive space of BTS – not unlike its fictive "smeraldo" flower shop – ends up restoring a sense of universal belonging, but in the process it also denies a sense of material belonging that could potentially tap into a Korean idea of the 'hood. Music in the era of social media has become a metamusical enterprise, appealing to a young global audience less preoccupied with a shared sense of history, language, and racial bonding raised in melody and lyrics. Instead of the actual offline 'hood affinity and lived sensibility that have been critical in building bonds around African American cultural history, BTS through BU offers an identifiable spirit of "telling stories of underdog experience" that is deeply felt by its fans through the social media space. Whether or not online spaces such as BU could actually rearticulate a lived, affective experience of either *bonto* or *gohyang*, which may sound old-school, they nevertheless firmly carve out an emotional space from a material and historical sense of place.

American Hustle Life

The transmedia storytelling that came into vogue with the first boy band, the Beatles, has reached a new level of heightened interactivity between stars and fans during the contemporary social media era. As Tamar Herman has argued, "K-pop has long utilized transmedia as a way to promote its stars across different mediums and to maximize revenue."[6]

Just like many other K-pop idols who have maximized their interaction with fans in order to further their careers beyond their identity as musicians, BTS members often become performers on different platforms such as stage, television, film, YouTube channels, celebrity travel shows, and advertisements. As social media have begun to demand more candid images from celebrities, K-pop stars have been unable to keep their private lives entirely separate from their fans, and the boundaries that separate public and personal image have begun to erode. The need to come up with stories and content beyond music posed a new challenge, especially for BTS, known since its early days both for its bold association with hip hop and for its effort to maintain close fan ties. Tight choreography, flashy colors, and youthful energy have never been lacking over the course of the group's young career. However, beyond their performances, how could the personal histories of its members be revealed in a way that would forge even stronger bonds with their fandom? BTS did manage to identify its early music alliance with hip hop, featuring no fewer than three rappers (RM, Suga, and J-Hope) and employing a dance routine steeped in b-boy choreography. However, as evident in the footage from *AHL*, there were still various barriers beyond skin color that prevented these young Korean musicians from achieving their identification with the hip-hop genre. Even as BTS's global fame has risen, hip-hop fame remains a distant reach. In the band's early efforts to bond with hip hop, its members were encouraged to reauthenticate their "real" stories of pain, hardship, and depression by traveling to Los Angeles in 2014. For many members of the group, this was their first trip to the United States.

The eight-part reality television show *AHL* begins in the worst way possible. In the first episode, almost immediately after the septet arrives at LAX from Korea, they are "kidnapped" by a group of "dark men" from an unattended parking lot when their road manager and driver exit their van. The young Koreans, who have had hardly any contact with people outside Asia up to this point, are struck by panic and fear, all captured by a hidden camera. They are subsequently taken to an empty house in a seedy section of Los Angeles that will become the setting for their reality television performance. The house is bare, with the exception of one room filled with seven prison-like steel bunk beds and a set of tawdry sofas. Unable to communicate with their Black captors about what is going on, they have been installed in an undisclosed Skid Row location. *AHL* thereby begins with images that evoke typical racist stereotypes, playing off the fear of Black men, people living on the street, and the inner city. Unfortunately, this image of African American culture and people, despite the supposed closeness that the group later establishes with their "captors," persists awkwardly throughout the program, which never manages to bridge the

gap between the aspiring hip-hop group and the West Coast mecca of American hip hop.

Although the members of BTS should have realized that their "kidnapping" was part of a scheme concocted by the producers of Mnet, they are nevertheless portrayed as a fearful bunch unaware of the multiethnic makeup of American culture. Even though veteran Korean rappers Tiger JK and Epik High have made efforts to publicize the significance of African American history, stemming from their youth spent in the United States, and although many hip-hop critics in Korea have emphasized the importance of hip hop's Black roots, the young K-pop idols of BTS, with the exception of the two main rappers, RM and Suga, have shown very little passion about learning this history.

The next day, a special guest arrives at the house where the Korean group is staying. It's Coolio, with his signature cornrow pigtails sticking up from his head. Although he is quite possibly twenty years past his prime, with no memorable musical success since his breakout hit "Gangsta Paradise" in 1995, Coolio will serve as a mentor to the young Korean musicians. The aging rap star starts by asking them basic questions about American hip hop. At a rapid clip, he asks, "How and where did hip hop start?" "What was the first rap single that went platinum?" and "Which group is Chuck D from?" Even RM, the only BTS member who speaks fluent English, has trouble understanding him, much less the others, who do not speak English. As Jimin proceeds to admit in a later interview inserted during the quiz, he had no idea who Coolio was nor any knowledge of the material he was being quizzed about. To be fair, Jimin is not one of BTS's rappers – rapping duties are shared mostly between RM and Suga – but because he is a member of a group known at the time for its hip hop, his professed unawareness underscores his naivete and ignorance of history. And of course, their unawareness could be rearticulated into an accusation that K-pop is merely a copycat music genre that imitates American styles and music without necessarily understanding the history and the struggles beneath their surface and swag.

To be sure, the program's characterization of BTS's members as unaware of the history of their own music genre may be too harsh. Many young rappers in present-day America may also be ignorant of the influence of Run DMC or Kurtis Blow; nor would they care much about the genealogy of rap music other than the fact that it started in the streets of the Bronx and Compton. Furthermore, Coolio likely had no knowledge of the history of the Korean hip-hop scene. BTS, to its credit, once paid tribute to Seo Taiji, one of the pioneering figures in Korean hip hop. In a 2017 concert by Seo, every member of BTS joined him on stage, performing several of his signature songs from the 1990s, including

"Class Ideology" and "Come Back Home." Clearly, BTS is willing to donate their time to pay respect to the history of Korean hip hop, which, especially now with the ascent of K-pop within global pop music, may well be considered as important as any other global hip-hop tradition outside the United States. Despite the growing distance between BTS and hip hop over the past five years, when *AHL* was shot in the mid-2010s, the members openly discussed that they wanted to be a lot more than just a copycat hip-hop group. The language barrier certainly also played a part in creating the awkwardness between the interrogator Coolio and his baffled Korean mentees.

Although the beginning of *AHL* is rough, the show does rebound somewhat from its initially shocking racist tones. Coolio, for instance, shows himself to be a caring mentor who offers useful advice to the young rappers, validates their own experiences, offers feedback on their performances of earlier hip-hop songs such as "Rapper's Delight," and also teaches them how to cook. He turns out to be as adept with the kitchen stove as he is with his verses. The boys from the K-pop group also walk the streets of Compton (and, later, Hollywood), attempting to impress random African American residents and visitors with their singing skills and dance moves. This was all shot in 2014, several years before BTS became a worldwide sensation, scoring hit after hit. Viewed half a decade later, the images of members of a now ridiculously famous septet desperately attempting to impress anonymous pedestrians on the streets of Los Angeles (although there is some speculation that the latter are professional actors paid to play prearranged roles for the show) are charming and novel, for they could never do the same today. The eight-episode show ends with a splash when BTS performs on stage with Iris Stevenson, the African American inner-city high school choir director whose real-life story inspired *Sister Act 2* (dir. Bill Duke, 1993). Stevenson teaches Black gospel songs for BTS to perform as part of their repertoire in the finale concert at the LA club Troubadour, where they first realized that they actually had a small, yet loyal fan base in the United States. BTS's encounter with Black culture in Los Angeles did help them write a couple of songs for their next album, *Dark and Wild*. This 2014 studio album features a song entitled "Hip-Hop Phile" (Hiphapseongaeja), which celebrates the historical roots of both African American and Korean hip hop. As if to compensate for their failure to come up with satisfying answers to Coolio while in Los Angeles, the song features the group naming all of the Black (and Korean) rappers, such as Jay Z, Snoop Dogg, J. Cole, and Epik High, among those who have influenced them. Suga's rap verses in this song also feature personal lyrics such as "going to a studio in Daegu, Namsandong . . . to throw myself and work the dull tip of a pen all night

long" in a rare acknowledgment of his Korean 'hood that became the soil for his success.

While *American Hustle Life* may be a goofy reality television program and a self-deprecating joke about a Korean hip-hop group, it nonetheless manages to ask fundamental questions about K-pop and the approval it seeks from American progenitors. Because contemporary Korean popular music in large part emerged from military *sho-dan* (entertainment troupe) musicians performing for American military personnel after the country's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, its focus was not changing the world so that Koreans would one day occupy the position of the center; it was more observing the hierarchical order. Even though Black music and "Blackness" were often at odds with the power of the white establishment, to most Koreans even hip hop was still aligned within the bounds of Western supremacy embodied in the American military presence in Korea. No matter how immaculately they execute their razor-sharp and athletic dance kicks or utter their rapid rap verses, Korean hip-hop stars' acts can never be compared to those of Michael Jackson or the Notorious B.I.G., for these Black stars have, until now, never had to create their own choreography or their signature rap styles.

Performance studies scholar Judith Hamera argues that "[Michael] Jackson's virtuosity is inexplicably linked to place and race: the socio-economic landscapes from which it emerged or, as the popular mythos has it, the places from and to which he 'escaped.'"[7] Not only do many of Jackson's songs pay homage to the rhythms and melodies of "Black folk," but his dance moves also quote many brilliant African American predecessors such as James Brown and Josephine Baker, to name a few. Although Jackson was raised in the industrial Midwestern town of Gary, Indiana, the songs of Southern Black sharecroppers narrating the toils of farm work were planted in his brain from early childhood. Even though the automated dance music genre called EDM has maintained its staying power mainly in clubs over the past two decades, what drives even the most contemporary popular music amalgamated from country, rock, hip hop, musical ballads, and other genres is a sense of home and of linguistic and melodic belonging, which builds a broad cultural base among listeners. Despite the earnest efforts of *AHL*'s coproducers, Mnet channel and Bang Si-hyuk, the leader of Big Hit Entertainment, to bridge the gap between the K-pop idols and the home of American hip hop, it was very clear that BTS would never manage to claim the dilapidated, barren streets of Compton as their musical home. *AHL* shows that the linguistic and cultural gap between American hip hop and K-pop, in addition to the difference between racial histories in the United States and Korea, proves to be as wide as the Grand Canyon. Aside from the intimacy built between the BTS

members and their mentors, Coolio and Warren G, the question remains: What kind of *bonto* ('hood) or *gohyang* (home) can BTS members imagine for themselves and their fans?

Bangtan Universe as a Sense of Home

BTS has one mighty ambassador: the ARMY, which may be the most significant fan club that has ever existed in the history of pop music. One might even claim that this fandom, which is actually more forcefully articulated in territories outside Korea than within the country, serves as BTS's real home. If the sense of belonging that rappers Coolio and Warren G sought within their creative space was located within the parameters of the African American neighborhood of Compton – just as the declining mills along the Midwestern riverfront cities of Minneapolis and Detroit served for Prince and Madonna, respectively – online fandom is where BTS would claim its home. The group lives and breathes through its fans, as members tweet, post updates, and maintain their own active social network channel on V Live, a live streaming service operated by Naver.com that provides frequent opportunities to interact with their fans. V Live is also where BTS releases special promotional videos, such as concert documentaries and reality television content for paid consumers.

Having no actual physical home base has allowed BTS to go further and cultivate the online space as its asylum. The group was ambitious in its launch of Bangtan Universe (BU), a shared fictional cyber universe that helped it acquire a hard-edged identity and served as a useful tool for building the superstardom that the group would eventually achieve in the mid-2010s. The internet is the base from which BU – a fictive yet nonetheless unique entity for the group itself and its fandom – has been created. In many ways, the internet offers both a reverie and a concrete home for artists like BTS, who are definitely from a specific country called Korea. But in the context of the American-dominated Western pop world they are essentially without a home insofar as Korea is mapped as a nondescript place lacking hip-hop roots and tradition. It was probably not coincidental that BTS's mainstream success came only *after* it began to drop its official affiliation with hip hop. Although RM and Suga continue to serve as the group's rappers and many of BTS's songs continue to be rooted in rap, the boy band ensemble has become undeniably more pop since its albums in *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life* series became global hits in 2015 and 2016 and subsequently served as the launching pad for BU. Unlike even bands such as Backstreet Boys, whose members were recruited from the Orlando, Florida, area, K-pop largely lacks the distinction of place. Though

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108938075.015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fans may be able to remember the hometowns of members of, for instance, BTS or TWICE, these groups can hardly be claimed as "home-brewed." Members are individually selected through various auditions held by an entertainment company that combs through the Korean countryside and even abroad in search of young new talent. BTS was no exception, as every member of the group was recruited from near and far corners of Korea by Big Hit Entertainment in the early 2010s. This meant that the members' identities would be homogeneously Korean yet lack a strong centripetal force that would allow them to claim a singularly common home in the sense of the Bronx or Compton – in a nation full of possible such homes, whether the Gangnam neighborhood in Seoul, well known for its nouveaux riches; Hongdae, on the other side of the nation's capital, known for its underground culture and arts; or even various rural areas in Korea known for the pristine beauty of their paddy farms, mountains, or scenic beaches. It could be argued that many places featured in BU or the travel reality show called *Bon Voyage* that the BTS members themselves make instantaneously become what Youngmin Choe has defined as "affective sites" that blur boundaries between history, memory, and consumerism in *Hallyu* cinema (Choe 2016). These sites, however, offer at best a fleeting sense of affinities. In other words, they may become tourist attractions for BTS fans but can never assume a sense of a home (*gohyang*) or an African American–style 'hood (*bonto*), which is deeply entrenched in the sociopolitical landscape of Korea that has yet to recover from its traumas of the twentieth century. Because BTS lacked both a musical genre home and a physical home, it may have been easier to craft what essentially became a cyber home called BU.

A dizzying array of reality television programs, podcasts, music videos, webtoons, and vignette story inserts for their CD albums (since *The Beautiful Moment in Life* in 2015) have given BTS's fans opportunities to interactively participate in creating narratives for BU. With the release of "I Need U" – the first single from *The Beautiful Moment in Life*, which would eventually become one of the group's biggest hits and change its direction toward a more pop sound – BTS also produced a music video that spearheaded a departure from its early aesthetic. Videos for their songs prior to "I Need U" featured visuals that almost exactly mirrored the templates of other K-pop groups (band members lip-synching and executing perfectly choreographed dance moves to upbeat songs in excessively colorful sets), but BTS found a new aesthetic that would accompany several music videos and even short films, unaffiliated with any of the songs on the album, that would later be constituted as BU.

Because there are so many accessible interpretations of BU, and particularly with the final summary of the narrative becoming available

through the 2019 webtoon *Save Me*, perhaps only a brief summary of "I Need U" suffices here. In this music video, all the BTS members are seen, mostly apart from each other, as they roam or struggle through spaces including dark alleys, foggy bathrooms, and abandoned train tracks. Jungkook gets beaten up by a group of thugs; J-Hope collapses in broad daylight crossing the bridge over the River Han; Jimin shivers alone in the bathroom next to a tub filled to the brim; RM pumps gas at a gas station; and V ends up stabbing an older man who appears to be his father, after the latter has violently beaten up V's sister. Along with these disturbing images, fire is seen being set in an anonymous location. Interspersed with flashback clips of the seven members collectively having a good time on an otherwise empty, desolate beach, this music video, like twenty or so other BU music videos and short films equally somber in tone, definitely veers away from the sense of *heung* (excitement or playful energy, or liveness) that Suk-Young Kim has defined as the force "forged around K-pop performances."[8] With neither dance nor singing performances, "I Need U" conveys a message of "hurt": a manufactured, desperate sense of collective longing to be with friends or loved ones with whom one may never be able to reunite.

If the 'hood that is projected in rap videos stands as a strong metaphor for the economic hardship and systemic racism that continually strike at the heart of the universal popular imagination, the images featured in BU open up postmetaphoric and metonymic significations that facilitate anational, postethnic, and post-traumatic figurations that have a greater degree of malleable, mentally illogical, and unmappable locations. Just like the fictive "smeraldo" flower of Italian origin (and a fiction narrative about an "international smeraldo federation" that putatively hosts a meeting every year), with its Naver.com blog site on which fake unrequited love stories are posted and announced, no real sense of history or place can be substantiated through these images on BU. Now, to rant that an image or sound from a K-pop video completely exceeds any particular historical and linguistic domain is perhaps not all that novel. BU is capable of becoming a positive, open-ended text. I am particularly drawn here to Kay Dickinson's notion that music videos strongly invoke a synesthetic response in which the aural and the visual "inform each other, cross each other's tracks, and most importantly, embody both a singularity and the potential to merge."[9] BU respects no linguistic fixity where the mouths of the singers are synched to the lyrics; no corporeal movement in which the idol's bodies are synchronized to the beats of the songs; and no history behind the geographical locations of the sets featured in the music videos. The abstraction and flatness of the images allow fans across many national and linguistic identities to creatively reassemble the signs being rendered. In so doing, BU's images and music open up what I call a "synesthetic

liminality" that realigns metaphors in order to rezone them in what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once termed "deterritorialized assemblages" that might block the trappings of metaphors and instead inspire viewers to rewrite the meanings of these images and music with more authority. Indeed, a quick search for "BTS Universe" on the internet will generate endless blogs and video channels by BTS fans who have voluntarily reordered, rewritten, and reauthorized the narratives of BU in a parallel, alternative universe separately engineered by fan fiction.[10]

BU does take a definitive step toward conceptualizing a sensorial framework that fully extends the utopian belief in the synesthetic metaphor that builds on the potential irreconcilable cross between music and visuals. Many of the visuals from the "certified 22 BTS videos" (some are music videos, others are short films with no songs) that officially constitute BU feature BTS members playing with each other in an alternate, somber reality. Alcohol abuse, violent fathers, drug addiction, suicidal anxiety, and depression are strong themes with which each and every member of BTS is associated. These traumatic themes raised in BU can benefit teenager fans struggling with mental anguish by encouraging them to share their stories in a more fluid manner, reconstructing them to blend narratives of both idols and fans. Imagining stories and sharing them with people who have undergone similar experiences can, of course, be therapeutic and productive.

However, this is not to suggest that BU operates outside the promotional machinery of the global capitalist enterprise. BU is no different from the many documentary short films, online fan meetings, and even the serialized travel show *Bon Voyage*, all featuring BTS members, that are craftily produced and distributed by Big Hit Entertainment and yield streams of revenue and profit. Particularly with regard to the mobile game BTS World released in fall 2020 – which piggybacks on BU by allowing players to construct their own stories loosely based on the BU setting and share them with other players – the entire enterprise can be seen as a shrewd consumer marketing strategy that is capable of packaging and commercializing even a subject of hurt. BU is similar to other streaming content and kitsch commercial products released by media empires such as Marvel Cinematic Universe or the Star Wars franchise or even Hello Kitty products, which even before BU also had success with their transmedia storytelling platforms for consumers in the age of social media.

Conclusion: Can K-Pop Rap?

It is astounding that a K-pop group consisting of young men who appear neither white nor Black has achieved a popularity level equal to, if not

greater than, that of Elvis or the Beatles, largely thanks to the fact that the internet has a broader reach than television did a little more than half a century ago. Given that their ethnic identities continue to be aligned with anational and posthistorical ones, it is perhaps not surprising that BTS's "universe" also still remains largely nondescript or hazy. Although obviously shot in Korea, most of the videos use settings that carefully avoid referencing any specific locations in Korea. Their abstraction of space expands the capacity of the various metaphors they employ, such as flowers, a bathtub, mirrors, and abandoned buildings and alleyways, into an open-ended signification that allows worldwide fans to reinterpret them. Yet in this process of reauthoring, what is lost are linguistic origins and ethnic historiographies that metaphors and poetic significations usually undergird.

Like it or not, we live in a world where ethnic violence, national strife, and gender wars continue to rage. The immense popularity that African American artists have enjoyed in the music world – much more so than in any other popular art form – was probably not coincidental. It is a lot more difficult to censor and ban what cannot be seen. Despite the ongoing discrimination that Black artists in the United States have had to face over the past century and earlier, they have almost certainly achieved greater representation in the music industry than in film and television. Their success, especially during the 1990s when music videos and hip hop were both in their heyday, meant that African American 'hoods, like it or not, acquired a greater force of expression. Exciting synesthetic figurations between sound and image continue to be achieved by Black artists today. Videos for Jay-Z's "4:44" and Kendrick Lamar's "Humble" challenge viewers to sensually feel the music through powerful spatial metaphors and the tension caught between them. By breaking down the barriers between image and sound, between language and music, and between images of the present and those from the past, the virtuosity of these artists is reconfirmed and the history of the people they represent can be rediscovered. K-pop's problem, despite the increasing visibility of groups like BTS in US social media, celebrity news, and talk shows, is that the visual counterparts of its music continue to foreground an unrecognizable and almost unidentifiable sense of physical and historical belonging, and this lost sense of place may eventually undercut the music's "universal" appeal. Though the places featured in BU may become popular tourist sites (see Chapter 14 in this book for more on K-pop tourism), the music content deliberately erases people, historical landmarks, and other mnemonic references that could allow viewers access to the sites' localization. In music, abstraction alone does not make great art. For true musical ingenuity to be recognized – and particularly for a song to claim authority

in hip hop, or in any other genre of music – it must, despite the rise of EDM or DJ music that deliberately features no sense of linguistic or national origin, orchestrate a sense of cultural roots, spatial belonging, and linguistic locality. It remains to be seen whether the idealistic, abstract projection of a group such as BTS – remaining ahistorical, aspatial, and, in particular, color-blind – can continue to inspire an asignifying metaphorical assemblage that welcomes "everyone." Unlike superheroes in Marvel comic books, R2-D2 of *Star Wars*, or Mario Brothers in video games, BTS members are real humans who will soon outgrow their youth and advance into a midlife where they may be required to look back on their own roots and history. Can K-pop rap? Of course it can. But can it rap songs in videos that synesthetically reference a historically dense space called Korea and its underlying real traumas? The jury is still out on that question.

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Notes

I wish to acknowledge Imelda Ibarra, the CEO and Founder of US BTS ARMY, who generously gave her time to talk about the subject of BTS Universe (BU) on several occasions – first at George Washington University in November 2019 and then again on Zoom in June 2020.

1 Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," March 21, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.
2 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, translated by Laurent DuBois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6. See also Kyung Hyun Kim, *Hegemonic Mimicry: Korean Popular Culture of the 21st Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
3 Andy Bennett, "Hip-Hop am Main, Rappin' on the Tyne: Hip-Hop Culture as a Local Construct in Two European Cities," in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (eds.), *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 190.
4 Cynthia Fuchs, "'I'm from Rags to Riches': The Death of Jay-Z," in Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton (eds.), *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 293.
5 See Naver.com, "Flower Smeraldo," https://m.blog.naver.com/PostList.nhn?blogId=testesso&categoryNo=0&currentPage=1.
6 Tamar Herman, *BTS: Blood, Sweat & Tears* (San Francisco, CA: Viz Media, 2020), 32.
7 Judith Hamera, "The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work," *PMLA* 127/4 (2012): 756.
8 Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 12.
9 Kay Dickinson, "Music Video and Synaesthetic Possibility," in Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton (eds.), *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 15.
10 Han Sobeom, "Jal Goochukhan 'Universe,' bangtan sonyeondan-eul segyejeok star-ro mandeuleokda" (Well-established universe has made BTS into a global star), *Hanguk ilbo*, August 17, 2020, www.elitedaily.com/p/heres-every-bts-video-thats-in-the-bangtan-universe-so-you-can-catch-up-22618079.