K-spice: bell hooks' "Eating the Other" and the Globalization of South Korean Popular Culture

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Abstract

This article critically examines the cultural politics underlying the commodification and consumption of South Korean culture in the globalized cultural economy. Adapting bell hooks' seminal essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" to contemporary contexts, it argues that K-culture functions as "spice"—a consumable, palatable exoticism that adds a new flavor to the mainstream culture while remaining a niche phenomenon. Incorporating critiques of value aestheticization in contemporary capitalism, the analysis highlights that K-culture exemplifies a broader development: cultural difference is reduced to aesthetics, packaged as a sanitized surface-level novelty, whose complexities are flattened and cultural elements depoliticized. The article introduces a novel theoretical approach to understanding the globalization of South Korean popular culture, simultaneously expanding hooks' analytical framework for today's aestheticized global cultural marketplace and articulating a broader transformation in how cultural difference is produced, consumed, and valued.

Keywords: Korean culture; cultural difference; aesthetic capitalism; bell hooks; cultural politics of globalization; K-culture

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> Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization.[2]

A remarkable scene in the internationally viral 2024 music video "Apt."—a collaboration between South Korean-New Zealand artist Rosé of K-pop group Blackpink and American pop star Bruno Mars—illustrates the complex dynamics of cultural globalization.[3] In the video, Mars waves two Korean flags and shouts *geonbae* ("cheers"), while playing a popular Korean drinking game with Rosé. The scene's playful incongruity—a non-Korean artist adopting South Korean symbols with meme-worthy enthusiasm—depends on the abstraction and repackaging of South Korean cultural elements for global entertainment. Here, the South Korean flag, typically a hyper-nationalized emblem, becomes a quirky prop in a spectacle of lighthearted cultural participation. This scene raises critical questions: Does it signify South Korea's growing cultural clout, or does it trivialize South Korean culture by rendering it a consumable object for superficial engagement? More broadly, what are the cultural politics underlying the commodification and consumption of South Korean culture in the globalized cultural economy? This article explores these questions by considering the politics of difference—racial, ethnic, cultural—alongside the dynamics of its commodification in the globalized culture industry, aiming to propose a new lens for understanding the integration of internationally circulating South Korean popular culture into the globalized cultural economy. Simultaneously, it leverages the South Korean case study to develop broader insights into how cultural difference is produced, consumed, and valued in the circuits of aesthetics-driven cultural commodification.

Taking inspiration from bell hooks' seminal essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," this article extends her theoretical approach and examines the global circulation of K-culture—commodified cultural elements marketed by associating them with Koreanness.[4] As hooks explains, behind the seemingly affirmative embrace of the Other often lurk essentializing and marginalizing undertones which open the possibilities for "eating the Other" as if they were an exotic spice—instrumentalizing and consuming their essentialized difference, without regard for its historical and political contexts. To adapt and expand the hooksian framework—derived from the African American experience in the 1990s—this analysis also draws on critical studies of globalization[5] and of the heightened role of aesthetics in late capitalism.[6]

The article argues that internationally circulating K-culture serves as a form of "spice" in the globalized popular-culture scene. This "spice" offers a sense of excitement and novelty through difference—which, however, is flattened to a surface-level aesthetic style, globally adaptable and culturally neutralized, whereas the non-western Other remains othered—perpetually external and exotic—despite being recognized for cultural contributions. The analysis enhances dominant approaches in the Korean Wave (Hallyu) scholarship by drawing critical attention to how the cultural economy of difference both enables and limits the globalization of South Korean popular culture. Building from the South Korean case, I underscore the increased significance of cultural "spice" in contemporary global flows.

1 Based on a paper presented at Scoping Workshop "The Third (Pop) Wave? Meaning(s) of Korea and its Global Cultural Influence in the Digital Age" held in Hannover in July 2024. The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable feedback provided by workshop participants and KER reviewers.

2 Bell Hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2009 [1992]), 373.

3 *APT — Rosé & Bruno Mars (Official Music Video)*, YouTube (2024), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekr2nIex040.

4 K-culture is defined as "hybridized Korean cultural products" in Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "South Korean Cultural Diplomacy and Brokering 'K-Culture' Outside Asia," *Korean Histories* 4, no. 1 (2013): 16. However, as I discuss later, hybridity might be a limiting framework for describing Korea-themed cultural products adapted for ease of international consumption.

5 William Mazzarella, "Culture, Globalization, Mediation," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 345–67.

6 Gernot Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism* (Mimesis International, 2017).

Primarily theoretical in scope, the article seeks to advance debates on the globalization of South Korean popular culture and its larger implications for understanding globalized cultural politics. It begins by introducing bell hooks' argument on the Other as a spice and argues for its relevance to understanding South Korean cultural globalization. Then it revisits the dominant approaches in Hallyu studies, arguing that the hooksian framework provides a necessary critical perspective. The following sections then proceed to apply and modify hooks' theoretical model in the context of the global circulation of South Korean popular culture. Specifically, I show how, with K-culture, "tradition" takes the place of "primitivism" as the marker of the Other. I also explore the neutralization of the desire for the Other, a potentially subversive force for hooks, as it becomes aligned with the dominant discourses of diversity. The final section explores the implications of South Korea's active invitation to global audiences to consume K-culture, distinguishing it from hooks' original examples, in which the Other is passively consumed.

Eating the Other: Racialized Other as a "Spice"

In her seminal essay, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," prominent social critic bell hooks explores the incorporation of racial and ethnic Others into mainstream popular culture as part of her critique of what she calls the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."[7] Particularly concerned with instrumentalization of African Americans, hooks questions whether contemporary expressions of desire for the Other—both in U.S. popular culture and among white Americans—can challenge existing power structures or whether they simply reinforce entrenched racism.

"Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture," hooks argues.[8] In this argument, a fascination with racial and ethnic difference serves to enliven the blandness of hegemonic mass culture, the dull homogeneity of which is a product of the normative values of whiteness and middle-class respectability. hooks sees white Americans as affected by "an emotional numbness," a cultural anesthesia resulting from relentless media consumption, which hooks connects to "anhedonia—the inability to feel pleasure."[9] The latter critique is illustrated by quoting French philosopher Michel Foucault's confession, indicating that, for hooks, this numbness extends beyond white Americans to encompass Euro-American culture as a whole.[10] This cultural condition, hooks suggests, drives a fascination with the Other who is imagined "on the edge" and feeling intensely—such as young black men in American culture, who incite senses of both desire and danger.[11] Besides this hunger for emotional intensity, the attraction of the Other also stems from "contemporary crises of identity in the west, especially as experienced by white youth," whom she sees as "dissatisfied by U.S. imperialism, unemployment, lack of economic opportunity, afflicted by the postmodern malaise of alienation, no sense of grounding, no redemptive identity"[12]—and seeking a sense of vitality, which they perceive as lacking in their own culture.

This cultural standstill, hooks argues, leads to the strategic appropriation of racialized and ethnicized Others who become a "spice" whose consumption revitalizes the dominant culture. hooks sees this as "a contemporary revival of interest in the 'primitive,'" but with a "distinctly postmodern slant."[13] If earlier

7 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 367.

8 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 366.

9 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 377.

10 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 370.

11 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 377.

12 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 369. While hooks herself focuses on critiquing racism and does not explicitly draw the connection, her damning assessment resonates with the earlier critiques of the culture industry, which attributed the monotony of mass-produced culture to its capitalist commercialization; it is also reminiscent of the critiques of the postmodern condition and its devastating effects on culture. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Herder and Herder, 1972); Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (O Books, 2009).

13 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 366.

colonial-era representations of racial difference stigmatized the Other as inferior, contemporary media repackages the same tropes as appealing novelties. In this context, engagement with Otherness is framed as a move away from historical racial oppression, signaling a shift to a supposedly more open and inclusive attitude. White desiring subjects often believe that their attraction to the Other marks a break from a racist past, presenting themselves as transgressive or even enlightened. Yet, hooks argues, these expressions of desire do not dismantle the structures of racial power but instead reproduce them. Consumption of the Other—understood as appropriation of the Other's cultural elements, identities, and bodies—becomes a way for white subjects to experience a thrill of transformation, a symbolic crossing of boundaries that allows them to momentarily identify with the Other, without actually sacrificing any of their power or privilege. The act of consumption is akin to a modern-day "cannibalism," where the attributes of the Other are ingested to revitalize the self.[14] This process, importantly, does not require any systemic or societal change, so the structures of marginalization remain intact.

Though hooks holds out a possibility that the desire for the Other *could* occasionally transform the desiring subject and connect to political solidarity,[15] she warns that without a critical understanding of how these desires operate within existing power dynamics, the Other will continue to be commodified, consumed, and then discarded, with no substantive challenge to the racist status quo. True subversion of the dynamics when the Other is "eaten" requires engagement with anti-racist politics and collective struggle, and refusal to engage on consumerist terms—a political potentiality that is not commonly fulfilled.[16]

While hooks focuses on African American culture, the implications of her critique are far-reaching, and her framework of "eating the Other" has been deployed to critique the exoticization of ethnic foods, migrant portrayals, transracial adoption, racial diversity as a global advertising trope, and other instances when ostensible appreciation of the racialized Other depends on their essentialization and instrumentalization for dominant projects, desires, and identities.[17] In this article, the hooksian lens is deployed to South Korean popular culture, whose international popularity allows for expanding arguments about contemporary "consumer cannibalism" of eating the Other in the context of cultural globalization.

Deodorized Odors of K-culture

The growing international popularity of South Korean popular culture since the early 2000s has sparked numerous scholarly inquiries into its appeal, especially to account for its ability to carve out an expanding niche on the global cultural stage long dominated by American pop culture. Early interpretations often drew parallels with similar phenomena of non-hegemonic nations becoming a cultural presence internationally, particularly with the globalization of Japanese popular culture in the 1990s. A key notion in this discussion has been Koichi Iwabuchi's concept of "*mukokuseki*" (non-nationality), which describes the cultural "odorlessness" of Japanese exports in the 1990s that circulated widely without carrying a strong cultural identity.[18] According to Iwabuchi, Japanese products such as anime and Sony Walkmans avoided promoting Japanese values, which made them globally palatable. He contrasts this cultural odorlessness with U.S. cultural imperialism, which often ties cultural products to an American way of life.

Building on Iwabuchi's framework, Sun Jung adapted the concept of odorlessness

14 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 373.

15 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 378.

16 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 378–9.

17 Godfried A. Asante and Gloria Nziba Pindi, "(Re)Imagining African Futures: Wakanda and the Politics of Transnational Blackness," *Review of Communication*, July 2, 2020; Akihiko Hirose and Kay Kei-Ho Pih, "'No Asians Working Here': Racialized Otherness and Authenticity in Gastronomical Orientalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 9 (September 2011): 1482–1501; Richey Wyver, "Eating the [M]Other: Exploring Swedish Adoption Consumption Fantasies," *Genealogy* 47, no. 3 (September 2019): 1–15; Bonnie Zare and S. Lily Mendoza, "'Mail-Order Brides' in Popular Culture: Colonialist Representations and Absent Discourse," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (July 1, 2012): 365–81; Matthew P. McAllister, Sydney L. Forde, and Yasemin Beykont, "Bell hooks' 'Eating the Other' as a Critical Advertising Framework," in *Postcolonial Marketing Communication: Images from the Margin*, eds by Arindam Das, Himadri Roy Chaudhuri, and Ozlem Sandikci Turkdogan (Springer Nature, 2024).

18 Kōichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002).

to analyze South Korean cultural exports.[19] However, rather than asserting a complete lack of cultural specificity, Jung interprets K-dramas and K-pop as manifestations of "transcultural hybridity." She argues that South Korean popular culture "is not only influenced by odorless global elements, but also by traditional (national) elements."[20] To illustrate her point, when analyzing the constructions of masculinity in Korean popular culture, Jung argues for their origins in "Confucian masculinity." Jung proposes the Korean term *chogukjeok*, trans-national, in contrast to Iwabuchi's *mukokuseki* (non-national), to underscore a "hybrid" identity that blends local elements and global influences. This framework, whether in direct reference to Jung's term *chogukjeok*, or kindred discussions of "hybridity," has become dominant in describing the global circulation of South Korean cultural exports, emphasizing the blend of Korea-themed and other cultural elements to deliver marketable products that appeal to international audiences.

Outside Hallyu studies, however, the concept of hybridity has been critiqued for its essentialist tendencies. Labeling something a "hybrid" depends on implicitly treating the constituting elements as stable and distinct, and on reasserting cultural boundaries, so rather than foregrounding the fluid, fragmented, and unstable nature of cultural forms, the concept ends up smuggling cultural substantialism and becoming complicit in the commodification of cultural differences.[21] When South Korean popular culture is described as hybrid, authors usually seek to highlight elements that could be linked to Koreanness, as in Jung's evocation of the "Confucian masculinity." This linking, however, obscures that those "Korean" elements are usually essentialized, decontextualized, and repackaged to suit the profit-driven culture industry. Koreanness is flattened into a surface-level aesthetic style, which might be associated with South Korea yet is devoid of cultural-historical depth. Even when elements that could be linked to "traditional" culture make an appearance, they carry little historical truth and are modified for easy and enticing consumption.[22] This surface-level aesthetic is more accurately described as K-culture, a marketable signifier of Koreanness, which should be distinguished from Korean culture, or even South Korean popular culture.

The aesthetics of South Korean cultural exports are insightfully analyzed in Vincenzo Cicchelli and Sylvie Octobre's sociological study of Hallyu appeal to French teenagers.[23] The authors reject earlier explanations of Hallyu popularity that underscored either cultural proximity or exotic difference. Instead, Cicchelli and Octobre argue that young fans appreciate Hallyu for its balance of the strange and the familiar, drawing on their earlier familiarity with American and Japanese pop cultures but also developing cultural curiosity about Korean difference—what Cicchelli and Octobre term the theory of cosmopolitan elective affinities. This represents the consumption patterns of "cultural omnivores," who seek diverse and novel cultural experiences, merging high and low cultural forms to demonstrate their cosmopolitanism and social distinction.[24]

Among the contributions of Cicchelli and Octobre's study is their interpretation of the success of South Korean cultural exports through the lens of "aesthetic capitalism," a framework introduced by cultural critic Gernot Böhme.[25] Böhme posits that, in contemporary capitalism, the pursuit to satisfy (finite) needs has been replaced by the pursuit to satisfy desires—infinitely expanding and thus ultimately unfulfillable; consequently, economic value is increasingly derived from the aesthetic aspects of products and services rather than their utility. South Korea's entertainment industry epitomizes this regime of value by producing highly stylized,

19 Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

20 Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, 3.

21 Mazzarella, "Culture, Globalization, Mediation."

22 CedarBough T. Saeji, "Building a K-Community: Idol Stars Challenging Foreign Fans to Learn Korean Traditions," *Acta Koreana* 25, no. 2 (2022): 133–57; CedarBough T. Saeji, "From Hanok to Hanbok: Traditional Iconography in Korean Hip Hop Music Videos," *Global Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 2 (August 1, 2020): 249–72.

23 Vincenzo Cicchelli and Sylvie Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture: Surfing the Korean Wave* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

24 Cicchelli and Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture*, 157–8; Richard A. Peterson, "Problems in Comparative Research: The Example of Omnivorousness," *Poetics*, 33, no. 5 (October 1, 2005): 257–82.

25 Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*.

visually pleasing, and emotionally engaging content.[26] While Cicchelli and Octobre focus on painting a broad-strokes picture of the "sociology of Hallyu" in France, situating Hallyu within Böhme's framework of "aesthetic capitalism" catapults it from a niche cultural phenomenon to a critical site for examining the evolution of aesthetic capitalism and its implications for the politics of cultural difference globally. South Korean cultural exports, I suggest, exemplify a global trend in which cultural difference becomes subordinated to aesthetics in order to be commodified within the globalized capitalist economy.

This attention to the aesthetic appeal of cultural difference invites back the notion of odorlessness but in a revised form. Henry Jenkins builds on Iwabuchi's analysis of the spread of Japanese popular culture in the U.S. by describing it not so much as "odorless" but "*deodorized* for broader publics"—recognized as Japanese albeit in superficial ways—while also "marketed as a distinctive fragrance to niche or cult audiences."[27] Jenkins' concept of "pop cosmopolitanism" captures the growing American fascination with Japanese pop culture's distinctive yet unthreatening difference—a dynamic that also characterizes the spread of K-culture and resonates with the above-mentioned "cultural omnivorism" ascribed to international fans. However, this focus on pop cosmopolitans' and cultural omnivores' appreciation of "deodorized" cultural difference ignores the implications of the essentialization and exoticization of the Other that such a consumption implies.

By approaching K-culture's transcultural circulation via a hooksian framework, the analysis moves away from the marketing-speak of cultural hybridity and toward critically questioning the conditions of K-culture's incorporation into global popular culture, as well as its implications for understanding the place of culture in late "aesthetic" capitalism. In the following sections, I explore how K-culture functions as hooksian "spice," adding flavor to global popular culture while embodying an aestheticized and sanitized form of cultural difference.

From Primitiveness to Tradition, from Transgression to Conformity

For hooks, the allure of the "spicy" Other is rooted in the fantasies of the Other's "primitiveness," a fascination that marginalizes even as it captivates. As she details for African Americans, what generates fascination is not contemporary African American culture formed in resistance to white supremacy, but rather a nostalgic, sanitized evocation of a "glorious" past—a fantasy grounded in stereotypes of the "primitive" that excludes African Americans from late-capitalist modernity.[28] The case of K-culture allows for questioning, updating, and expanding this framework, revealing variations in the markers of Otherness and changes in how difference has become further depoliticized within twenty-first-century consumer culture.

The case of K-culture ostensibly challenges hooks' theory because K-culture is anything but primitive. K-productions delight with a high-tech, hyper-modern aesthetic, and K-celebrities are icons of consumerist sophistication, often surpassing Euro-American stars in their refined style.[29] Neither are relevant the associations with primordial passion and intensity, which, according to hooks, stimulate a desire for the black Other in white American audiences. Instead, K-celebrities, similar to other East Asians, are stereotyped as hard-working and disciplined, which places them on the side of modernity, even if not always with positive connotations.[30] While there are orientalist stereotypes that link Asian people to sexual deviance that could render Korean Others "spicy,"[31] they are largely dormant in K-culture

26
Cicchelli and Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture*, 37–42.

27
Henry Jenkins, "Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence," in *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*, eds. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Desiree B. Qin-Hilliard (University of California Press, 2004): 124, italics added.

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Hooks, "Eating the Other," 370.

29
Olga Fedorenko, "South Korean Celebrities and Lifestyle Media." In *Introducing Korean Popular Culture*, edited by Youna Kim. Routledge, 2023.

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These stereotypes associate with lack of individuality and robot-like mannerisms, but, when interpreted sympathetically, qualify K-celebrities as perfect neoliberal selves, role models for late-capitalist hegemonic subjectivity (Rachael Miyung Joo, *Transnational Sport: Gender, Media, and Global Korea* (Duke University Press, 2012); Gooyong Kim, "K-Pop Female Idols: Culture Industry, Neoliberal Social Policy, and Governmentality in Korea," in *The Routledge Handbook of Global Cultural Policy*, (Routledge, 2017)).

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Joo, Transnational Sport, 108, 134; L. H. M. Ling, "Sex Machine: Global Hypermasculinity and Images of the Asian Woman in Modernity," *positions: East Asia cultures critique* 7, no. 2 (1999): 277–306.

and K-celebrities, whose extreme youth, playful childish manners (*aegyo*), and cute public personas disqualify them from hyper-sexualized roles.

In the case of K-culture, I argue, "tradition" takes the place of what hooks critiques as the fantasies of primitiveness attributed to the Other. If hooks' "primitive" connects to "more intense, more satisfying …ways of doing and feeling,"[32] the "tradition" evoked in the clichéd description of K-culture as a "hybrid of tradition and modernity" opens a door to a more stable, wholesome way of life and an orderly moral universe, presumably still available in South Korea alongside hyper-consumerism. As Anthony Giddens argues, modernity, with its relentless pace and constant upheaval, often generates a sense of loss and dislocation, prompting a nostalgic desire for tradition as a counterbalance to the uncertainties of contemporary life.[33] In the context of K-culture, this longing finds satisfaction when "Korean tradition" is projected onto features that distinguish K-culture from the dominant Euro-American cultural tropes.

That "tradition" plays an important role in consuming K-culture is evident from Hallyu reception studies. Generally, fans appreciate K-productions for emphasizing emotional bonds, mutual support, relationships, and kinship, while avoiding overt references to politics, sex, drugs, or social critique. These conventions are typically read as reflecting "Asian values" and being characteristically Korean, which, in the eyes of the fans, renders them also "traditional"—whereas projected "hybridity" works to reconcile those fantasies of connection to a premodern past with the hyper-modern images of contemporary South Korea.[34] Thus, beneath the facade of a trendy consumerist society, there is "tradition" exposing oneself to which might offer delight for a general audience, or, for aficionados of K-culture, a transformative experience and escape from the impasses of the Euro-American mainstream, similarly to how "The point is to be changed by this convergence of pleasure and Otherness" in hooks' essay.[35]

Another fundamental shift from the hooksian dynamics lies in how, in the twenty-first century, the pleasures of engagement with Otherness are less the pleasures of transgression than the pleasures of conformity. In the 1990s' U.S., sidestepping racial boundaries to consume the Other carried both a risk and a genuine (if limited) transgressive potential—challenging the white supremacist status quo and promising transformative encounters that actually could, on some occasions, "alter one's place and participation in contemporary cultural politics."[36] In contemporary consumerist culture, engagement with difference has not only become acceptable but is actively encouraged as a marker of desirable values and social distinction. Diversity has become espoused as a means to market to minority groups and appeal to cultural elites and youth who celebrate inclusivity.[37] The difference of the Other no longer shocks mainstream sensibilities but testifies to its consumers' developed taste and cultural refinement—like knowing how to incorporate kimchi into one's home-made dinner. Where hooks observed that encounters with difference once required individuals to "make one's self vulnerable" and temporarily relinquish one's mainstream positionality,[38] today's consumption of Otherness reinforces rather than challenges that very positionality. The risk and potential transformation that hooks identified as both the promise and the problem of commodified Otherness have been eliminated, replaced by the comfortable assurance that one's cosmopolitan consumption demonstrates cultural sophistication and possibly moral superiority.

K-culture aligns with these trends toward neutralization of Otherness, offering an aesthetically pleasing, non-threatening, "deodorized" version of difference. It allows

32 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 366.

33 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Polity Press, 1990).

34 Cicchelli and Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture*, 211–212, 236–7; Irina Lyan and Alon Levkowitz, "Consuming the Other Israeli Hallyu Case Study," in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, eds. Sangjoon Lee and Abe Markus Nornes (University of Michigan Press, 2015); Saeji, "Building a K-Community."

35 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 369.

36 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 367.

37 Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc: The Marketing and Making of a People* (University of California Press, 2012); Cicchelli and Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture*; Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Knopf Canada, 2000); Anamik Saha and Sandra Van Lente, "Diversity, Media and Racial Capitalism: A Case Study on Publishing." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 16 (December 10, 2022): 216–36; Shalini Shankar, *Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers* (Duke University Press, 2015).

38 Hooks, "Eating the Other," 367.

non-Korean consumers to feel cosmopolitan and progressive without confronting either practical challenges of cultural difference or histories of oppression and orientalism. Indeed, as Cicchelli and Octobre observe, consuming K-culture has become a way for French teenagers and their parents to demonstrate their "open-mindedness" in a context where embracing diversity has become a social ideal.[39] An investment in diversity as a marker of social distinction is also evident in critiques voiced by western K-pop fans when K-artists release English-language tracks or adopt conventions that resemble mainstream American popular culture, revealing a desire for an "authentic" difference that enhances the consumers' cosmopolitan self-image.[40]

K-culture, then, seduces with tradition-flavored novelty optimized for commodification and globalized consumption. While distinct from the mainstream Euro-American popular culture, its "spice" is mostly a deodorized aesthetic aligned with hegemonic values.

K-celebrities and Their Deodorized Koreanness

K-culture's promise of a safely commodified exciting difference is fully realized in K-celebrities, the actual Korean Others that international audiences get to know and consume. K-celebrities captivate global fans with their charming personalities, exquisite styles, and social media prowess while remaining Other in the public eye. Their difference is part of their meaning as signs and their circulation as commodities;[41] it seamlessly aligns with consumerist capitalism and causes little social or political challenge.

The comfortable and pleasurable consumability of K-celebrities stems partly from the peculiarities of South Korean celebrity culture, which demands not only artistic excellence and perfected appearance, but also strict adherence to societal norms and unequivocal suitability as positive role models.[42] As "image commodities," K-celebrities cultivate such appealing, sanitized personas across multiple genres, from variety shows to advertisements.[43] Within global economies of difference, this "clean" image contrasts with scandal-prone western celebrities and also distances them from the negative hyper-sexualized othering of Asian people. These culture-industry safeguards to maximize celebrity commodity value not only contribute to K-celebrities' differentiation but also activate fantasies of the Korean Other who has escaped corruption by modern malaises—the intriguing "traditional" flavor that spices up K-style modernity, as discussed in the previous section.

That K-celebrities' Koreanness is reduced to surface-level K-style is obscured by how, inside and outside South Korea, they are seen not simply as individual artists but also as national representatives "promoting" their homeland. This ambassadorial role ensures domestic support and is typically embraced enthusiastically by entertainers themselves, who, like other South Koreans, are socialized to leverage individual accomplishment for national benefit.[44] Yet, importantly, K-celebrities' nationalism is increasingly depoliticized and aestheticized to preserve international marketability.[45] It is often flattened into a spectacle—when Korean flags appear in music videos, they signify a K-aesthetic rather than an endorsement of South Korea's side on contentious international issues. That, in the above-considered "Apt" music video, a non-Korean can appear waving a Korean flag demonstrates this aestheticization—adding K-flavor while containing little actual Korean substance. If, in the early 2010s, K-celebrities faced irreconcilable pressures between Korean

39 Cicchelli and Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture*, 275, 284.

40 Ana Saplala, "Tongues Untied: Words on Fandoms and Foreignness in K-Pop," *Medium* (blog), December 1, 2024. https://saplalaana.medium.com/tongues-untied-words-on-fandoms-and-foreignness-in-k-pop-44624bbf1b67.

41 David P. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

42 Jeongmee Kim, "Why Does Hallyu Matter? The Significance of the Korean Wave in South Korea," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 47–59.

43 The concept of image commodities is introduced by Gabriella Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan* (Duke University Press, 2010). For its application in the South Korean context, see Fedorenko, "South Korean Celebrities and Lifestyle Media"; Hyun Gyung Kim, "The Korean Wave Celebrity and the Birth of the K-Drama Conglomerate," *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 6, no. 2 (2020): 223–38.

44 Joo, *Transnationl Sport*; Kim, "Why Does Hallyu Matter?"; Stephen Epstein, "Fly the Flag (at Your Own Risk): Netizens, Nationalism and Celebrities between South Korea, Japan and Beyond," in *Popular Culture and the Transformation of Japan–Korea Relations* (Routledge, 2020); Olga Fedorenko, "Korean-Wave Celebrities between Global Capital and Regional Nationalisms." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017): 498–517; Keith, "BTS as cultural ambassadors," 156.

45 Fedorenko, "Korean-Wave Celebrities between Global Capital and Regional Nationalisms," 503–4.

audiences seeking nationalist representation and overseas audiences expecting sensitivity to their positions on conflictual issues,[46] with Hallyu's globalization beyond Asia in the 2020s, audiences in regions with little geopolitical connection to South Korea consume Korean nationalism itself as an aestheticized component of K-culture.

Similarly, the recent trend for incorporating "traditional" Korean elements into South Korean popular-cultural productions does little to immerse international consumers in actual Korean lifeworlds, culture, and history. Writing about music videos, CedarBough Saeji welcomes such incorporations as the artists' assertion of Korean identity and national pride but also critiques them for distilling Korean tradition into "a few icons," which are often historically inaccurate.[47] This reduction of Korean tradition to visual garnish and disinterest in looking beyond the "attractive, fascinating and perhaps even exotic"[48] surface mirrors hooks' critique: marginalized and non-western cultures are mined for fresh flavors to enhance rather than challenge the mainstream palette. Simultaneously, K-pop artists' cultural Otherness is reaffirmed when their incorporation of "traditional" elements is interpreted not as surface-level aesthetic choices—which they often are—but as evidence of innate traditional knowledge,[49] serving the fantasy of K-idols, and perhaps Korean people in general, as intriguing "hybrids of tradition and modernity"—what hooks would see as reinforcing the dynamics of othering.

Beyond consumerist pleasures, K-celebrities' Otherness functions, true to hooks' critique, as a tool for mainstream self-discovery and Euro-American superiority reassertion, thereby decentering and exoticizing Korean experience.[50] Sarah Keith's analysis of media coverage of K-pop group BTS in western English-language media shows how the band's Koreanness was an important part of all the discussions, which typically included opinions about Korea itself and the reasons for BTS´s popularity, which were positively or negatively related to perceived Korean cultural factors.[51] Similarly, Irina Lyan found that *New York Times* contributors' expressions of shock and surprise at South Korean popular culture's international success reflect ongoing stigmatization of non-western cultures, interpreting such achievements as unusual and shadowed by negative associations—excessive fans, regional tensions, and political instability.[52] The international popularity of K-celebrities thus encourages public discourses that, while positive on the surface, reaffirm them as Other, reinforcing perceptions of them not as individual artists but as embodiments of a foreign culture—different and exotic, comprehensible through representative cultural traits, and subjects of curiosity and cosmopolitan appreciation.

K-celebrities thus serve as a deodorized spice that enhances the global pop culture scene without threatening its west-centric foundations and hierarchies. Consuming these ethnic Others is hardly transgressive and brings no political risk—only entertainment, information about consumerist trends, and pleasures of fandom. "Eating" the Korean Other is made easier still, since most South Korean stakeholders are on board with this exoticizing consumption as long as it can be interpreted as enhancing South Korea's international recognition.

Serving K-culture

In hooks' essay, the "eaten" Other is ultimately ill-fated, and the potential for cross-cultural desire to dismantle the structures of othering is seldom realized. The Other is valorized for their uniqueness and seduced by this newfound recognition,

46 Fedorenko, "Korean-Wave Celebrities between Global Capital and Regional Nationalisms."

47 Saeji, "From Hanok to Hanbok," 266.

48 Saeji, "From Hanok to Hanbok," 267.

49 Saeji, "Building a K-Community."

50 Cf. hooks, "Eating the Other," 374–5.

51 Keith, "BTS as cultural ambassadors."

52 Lyan concludes pointedly, "The media's disappointment with the Korean Wave and its national origins, reimagines "K" as similar, to some extent, to the "A" in Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1850) novel *The Scarlet Letter*, the sign of stigma and norm violation." Lyan, "Shock and Surprise," 45.

only to end up instrumentalized and essentially discarded, "consumed"—or even "cannibalized"—for enriching the experiences of the dominant subject, whose desire for the Other rarely connects to the politics that could actually benefit that Other. South Korea's global consumption presents a seemingly different dynamic. Far from being passively consumed by outsiders, South Korean social actors actively invite global audiences to feast on K-culture, serving Korean culture up with remarkable eagerness, if not dogged persistence.[53]

South Korea's drive for international validation can be traced to the historical traumas of Japanese colonization, national division, and neocolonial relations with the U.S., and it reflects a psychologized dichotomy between "advanced" and "backward" countries, which has informed the influential local interpretation of global geopolitics.[54] For most of the twentieth century, Korean culture was framed as a hindrance to modernity under the influence of modernization theory. Branded "backward" with minimal contemporary relevance, it was relegated to folklorist study. However, South Korea's phenomenal economic growth in the 1980s prompted a reevaluation of Korean cultural elements as a source of success, particularly as the discourses of "Confucian capitalism" gained traction. The 1988 Seoul Olympics marked a pivotal moment in rekindling domestic interest in Korean culture, setting the stage for a "cultural revival." As Kim et al. note, the Olympics and particularly its much-praised opening and closing ceremonies, which showcased Korean traditional arts, "instilled pride in Korean culture and swept away lingering feelings of inferiority towards western culture."[55]

This cultural reappraisal coincided with a fundamental transformation in how culture itself was conceived. As South Korea transitioned into a post-industrial society in the 1990s, the traditional concept of culture as shared life and intrinsic value to local people, serving as a guide to their practices and a source of their enjoyment, was supplanted by an instrumental view of "culture as a commodity or object of consumption."[56] Kweon Sug-In observes that in the 1970s and 1980s, Korean culture fed "the alternative, resistant national sentiments of the people's cultural movement [*minjung*]," whereas in the 1990s, Korean culture became valued primarily for its economic function, positioned as a resource to enhance South Korea's competitiveness in the global market.[57] Kweon's insights are backed by an ethnographic vignette from Cho Hae-Joang who depicted tensions at an early 1990s Seoul conference: anthropologists, steeped in the critiques of cultural essentialism, frustrated business and government participants who wanted to identify and commodify uniquely Korean elements for cultural and economic advancement in the globalization era.[58] This reconfiguration of culture from social resource to economic asset reflects South Korea's integration into aesthetic capitalism, as its export-driven economy was changing tracks from selling cost-efficient appliances to high-value-added aestheticized commodities and particularly cultural exports.

The commodification of Korean culture and tradition has received much academic attention, with multiple studies exploring the dilemmas of balancing the imperatives for easy consumability and claims to cultural authenticity.[59] Moon Okpyo showed, for example, how old *yangban* houses in Andong, once private spaces of elite Confucian life, were transformed into tourist attractions. Tourist consumability, however, required significant compromises, such as converting private family rituals of *yangban* descendants into public performances for anyone to enjoy and transforming *yangban* into "every Korean's common ancestors."[60] Such studies reveal that preserving traditional culture often depends on commodification

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Mary J. Ainslie, "Korean Overseas Investment and Soft Power: Hallyu in Laos," *Korea Journal* 56, no. 3 (2016): 5–32; JungBong Choi, "Hallyu versus Hallyu-Hwa," in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, edited by Sangjoon Lee and Abe Markus Nornes (University of Michigan Press, 2015); Juliette Schwak, "Branding South Korea in a Competitive World Order: Discourses and Dispositives in Neoliberal Governmentality," *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 3 (2016): 427–44.

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Olga Fedorenko, "Globalization and Affective Economy of Othering in South Korea: Emotional Particularism in Orion Choco Pie Advertisements," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022): 174–91; Jongtae Kim, "The Discourse of Sŏnjin'guk: South Korea's Eurocentric Modern Identities and Worldviews" (PhD Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011).

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Jong-gie Kim, Sang-woo Rhee, Jaecheon Yu, Jongduck Hong, and Kwangmo Koo, "Impact of the Seoul Olympic Games on National Development," *Korea Development Institute* (1989): 37.

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Sug-In Kweon, "Discourses of Korean Culture amid the Expansion of Consumer Society and the Global Order," *Korean Anthropology Review* 1, no. 1 (2017): 131–59: 134.

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Kweon, "Discourses of Korean Culture amid the Expansion of Consumer Society and the Global Order," 134–6.

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Hae-Joang Cho, "Constructing and Deconstructing 'Koreanness.'" in *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States*, ed. Dru C. Gladne (Stanford University Press, 1998).

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Andrew David Jackson, Codruța Sîntionean, Remco Breuker, and Cedarbough Saeji, eds., *Invented Traditions in North and South Korea* (University of Hawaii Press, 2021); Laurel Kendall, ed., *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity: Commodification, Tourism, and Performance* (University of Hawaii Press, 2011); Okpyo Moon, "Dining Elegance and Authenticity: Archaeology of Royal Court Cuisine in Korea," *Korea Journal* 50, no. 1 (2007): 36–59.

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Moon, "Dining Elegance and Authenticity," 102.

that drains historical meanings and repackages remaining elements into what could be described as "culture-lite." In hooksian terms, the above example represents "cannibalizing" Confucian tradition—consuming it to transform tourists through "ancestral" *yangban* connection and lifestyle experience. Spectacularized traditions prepped for tourist consumption have been a staple of advertisements by the Korean Tourism Organization—what Pan et al. interpret as strategic self-orientalism, which reappropriates the tropes of the traditional and exotic, mixing them with the spectacles of economic and technological advancement, in order to stir fantasies with a promise of an enticing, hedonistic adventure and an experience of high-class consumption and service.[61] The trajectory of cultural commodification culminates in the systematic promotion of K-culture—the adaptation of Korean cultural elements for aesthetic appeal, marketability, and easy consumption within the regime of aesthetic capitalism.

The spectacular international success of K-culture can be interpreted as the triumph of South Korean agency through its strategic participation in global cultural circuits and efficacious negotiation of the terms of its own representation. Yet, to situate this mainstream recognition within hooks' critique, this success does not guarantee that Koreans have transcended the status of the Other whose role is limited to enriching the mainstream with a new flavor. For hooks, even when marginalized groups willingly participate in and economically benefit from the commodification of their identity and culture, this offers only a fleeting "promise of recognition and reconciliation"[62] within contained arenas without challenging the structures of domination. Complicities with being consumed, hooks argues, risk decontextualizing experience, perpetuating othering stereotypes, and stripping cultural productions of political integrity, reducing them to a spectacle that primarily benefits the dominant culture.[63]

The reduction of Korean culture to surface-level K-style evokes hooks' critique of how signs of black nationalism—clothing and hairstyles—become commodified and "stripped of political integrity and meaning" as "communities of resistance" become "replaced by communities of consumption."[64] While Korean culture may retain some capacity for resistance—as evidenced by K-pop fans showing up for Yoon Suk Yeol impeachment rallies with their lightsticks in winter 2024–25—such instances are contained, and it is difficult to avoid connecting the commercialization and aestheticization of culture to the fact that many South Koreans, especially youth, have seemingly lost resilience and succumbed to political apathy.

Furthermore, while international fans occasionally join Korean netizens in supporting South Korea's position on territorial disputes or "comfort women" advocacy when K-celebrities champion these topics,[65] they more typically leverage their K-fandom for agendas that do not originate in South Korea, such as Black Lives Matter or anti-Trump activism.[66] This pattern exemplifies hooks' concern: K-culture becomes a resource to be extracted to address problems in Euro-American contexts.

Even with these instances of politicization, K-culture primarily forges a "community of consumption," centered on engaging with K-content and emulating K-celebrity lifestyle trends. Though international fans are known to participate in a wide array of philanthropic causes inside and outside South Korea, these efforts are often driven by the desire to improve an idol's or fan community's public image, and typically concern nonpartisan causes that are politically uncontroversial—charity for the elderly or rainforest planting.[67] Similar to giving by elites and corporate

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Steve Pan, Carla Santos, and Seongseop Kim, "Promoting Tourism, Projecting Power: The Role of Television Commercials," *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 34, no. 2 (2017): 192–208.

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Hooks, "Eating the Other," 370.

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Hooks, "Eating the Other," 375–6.

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Hooks, "Eating the Other," 375–6.

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Kang Aa-young, "BTS Fans Collectively Support Transnational Charity." *The Korea Times*, December 2, 2018. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/trends/20181202/bts-fans-collectively-support-transnational-charity.

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Annette Ekin, "Are K-Pop and BTS Fans a New Force for Social Justice?" Al Jazeera, July 20, 2020. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/7/1/are-k-pop-and-bts-fans-a-new-force-for-social-justice.

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Katelyn Hemmeke, "Planting Rainforests and Donating Rice: The Fascinating World of K-Pop Fandom." *Korea Exposé*, February 20, 2017. https://web.archive.org/web/20200624190322/https://www.koreaexpose.com/fascinating-world-k-pop-fandom-culture/; Saeji, "Perspective."

philanthropy, this humanitarianism might provide temporary relief, but ultimately serves conservative social engineering that ensures the reproduction of the existing structures of power and inequality[68]—it does little to facilitate "communities of resistance."

While both supplying and consuming parties may appear content with this cultural economy, the dish being served is ultimately aesthetic capitalism with Korean seasoning. In transforming itself into palatable spice for global consumption, South Korea may have succeeded in flavoring the world's cultural palate, but at the cost of repackaging its cultural repertoire as "culture-lite" ingredients that aesthetic capitalism demands—spectacularizing decontextualized "tradition" while pioneering the newest consumerist trends. That South Korea eagerly offers itself as agreeable spice in the globalized popular culture's menu does not fundamentally alter the dynamics hooks critiques—agentive consent may change the terms of consumption but not the underlying structure that reproduces the Otherness of the "eaten" Other.

Conclusion

Returning to the article's opening scene from the music video "Apt," Bruno Mars' enthusiastic waving of South Korean flags offers a vivid tableau of K-culture's global circulation, whereby cultural recognition comes at the cost of reducing Koreanness to a consumable cool symbol. Mars' playful gesture exemplifies how cultural elements are absorbed into a consumerist framework, transformed into a fashion statement and exotic spice, with even nationalism commodified and depoliticized. This scene captures the workings of cultural globalization under aesthetic capitalism.

To sum up, this article has argued that K-culture functions as "spice" in the globalized cultural economy. It mobilizes associations with foreign tradition, Asian difference, and mystified Koreanness to offer accessible exoticism—distinct from the mainstream yet tailored to dominant tastes and values. Marketed as a blend of tradition and modernity, K-culture entices international audiences to explore the foreign and refine their lifestyles, while aligning with hegemonic diversity and inclusion discourses. Yet this export-friendly packaging requires simplifying, aestheticizing, and depoliticizing Korean cultural elements. International recognition thus often remains decontextualized, spectacularized, and disconnected from lived South Korean realities. By aestheticizing Koreanness and marketing cultural difference, K-culture realizes the logic of aesthetic capitalism, which demands commodified "cultures-lite" as exotic spices to flavor the humdrum tastes of the globalized culture industry.

Diverging from celebratory accounts of globalizing South Korean popular culture, this analysis heeds hooks' warning that desire for the Other, while seemingly progressive, often instrumentalizes difference and serves racialized capitalism. International K-culture consumption can simultaneously reflect desires to understand the Other while reinforcing structures that limit that understanding to what is commodified and palatable. The case is complicated by how South Korean social actors actively encourage this consumption, but this "will to be eaten"—even if reconceptualized as an agentive "will to feed"—does not cancel the fundamental dynamic that conditions recognition on commodification and marginalization, ultimately constraining cultural influence from (semi-)periphery to

68 John H. Hanson, "The Anthropology of Giving: Toward A Cultural Logic of Charity." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 8, no. 4 (2015): 501–20.

niche consumption categories. Further research is needed to explore concrete cases in which K-entrepreneurs align with, or subvert, the centrifugal dynamics of cultural globalization, tracing the costs, complicities, and benefits for variously positioned Korean subjects when Korean culture is distilled to exportable spice.

Trending flavor in the spice rack of the globalized culture industry, K-culture offers a productive site for extending hooks' framework to account for how cultural difference is "eaten" today—not as "primitive" and distant from modernity, but as a blend of "tradition" and hyper-modern consumerism. More consequentially, hooks' 1990s analysis assumed that consuming Otherness retained transgressive potential—that encounters with difference could disrupt mainstream positionality, even if they ultimately failed to disrupt societal relations of domination. By the 2020s, this transformative capacity has been neutralized. Consuming difference now affirms hegemonic ideals, demanding little from mainstream consumers beyond the pleasure of adding unfamiliar flavors to their cultural diet while burnishing their cosmopolitan credentials.

South Korea exemplifies but does not exhaust this phenomenon. Around the world, cultural distinctiveness is increasingly packaged as consumable difference for global markets. Contra accounts that hail South Korea as refuting cultural imperialism, its remarkable success in serving itself to the world may represent not imperialism's subversion, but its refinement: the subsumption of culture by aesthetic capitalism, which distills cultural resources into exportable exoticisms and consumerist delights.

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