The *Dark & Wild* Past of BTS: Identity Building Through Binary Formations in *American Hustle Life*

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Inception

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of Mnet's reality show, *American Hustle Life,* which stars the famous Korean Pop group, BTS. Early in their career, BigHit Entertainment intentionally modelled BTS's image after stereotypes of the supposedly Black, gangster, hardcore male popularized in American hip-hop. These stereotypes are especially at play in the Mnet reality show, *American Hustle Life.* The showrunners utilize Oriental, masculine-feminine, and Black-White binaries to communicate a narrative arc in which the members of BTS absorb the qualities of their Black mentors and transform into macho, "authentic" hip-hop artists, thereby reaching success in America. This essay explores how narratives with racialized and gendered binaries have historically been used to consolidate a favorable identity for White, male, Western powers. *American Hustle Life* is an unexpected, yet potent, example of how these binary

narratives work, and how such narratives continue to shape the racial imaginary of today's popular culture.

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As of 2021, the South Korean musical group, Bangtan Sonyeondan, widely known as BTS, is the biggest active boy band in the world, with massive fan bases in South Korea, the United States, Brazil, Japan, and many countries across the globe. BTS has spent over 200 weeks topping the Billboard Social 50, a chart that measures the most-engaged-with musician accounts on social media ("SOCIAL 50"). In 2020, the group was named the best-selling music act worldwide by IFPI, an organization that represents the global recording industry. They are the first non-Western act to win (Jones). BTS is the first South Korean artist to achieve a long-lasting success in America, and as the years go by, their popularity only seems to grow ("K-Pop 2.0: How BTS Becomes America's Hottest Boy Band"). Without a doubt, they are a force to be reckoned with.

Formed under BigHit Entertainment in 2013 (which at the time was a small Indie music company based in Seoul, South Korea), BTS was an unlikely candidate for success, as they did not belong to one of the Big Three K-pop entertainment companies.[1] Since then, however, they have surprised the world, breaking records, amassing a huge global following, and establishing themselves in the American music market ("BTS vs. K-POP: a video essay"). While their current image, marketing strategies, and success are

[1] The Big Three (YG, JYP, and SM Entertainment (Lie 149)) founded K-pop and continue to produce some of the biggest names in K-pop today, including Blackpink (YG), NCT (SM), and Twice (JYP). Though contested, it is a common belief in K-pop fandoms that these companies provide their artists with better resources and therefore better chances for success, while smaller companies face underdog status.

interesting in relation to the burgeoning study of internet fan culture, their current status will not be the main focus of this essay. Rather, I will focus on the early days of their career, when BTS's image was far different from what it is today, perhaps best described by the title of their first full-length album, *Dark & Wild.* The stark contrast between BTS's visual aesthetics in 2013-2014 (think black leather, bandanas, and gold chains) and their aesthetic in 2019 (characterized by soft silks, pastel hair, and delicate jewellery) is perhaps unsurprising; it is common for South Korean popular music (K-pop) groups to switch aesthetics between 'eras' (a word used in K-pop fandom to demarcate the promotion periods associated with different albums and singles).

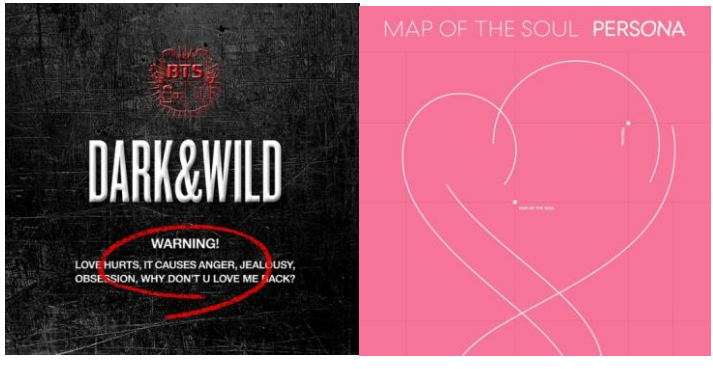

Fig 1*.* Left: *Dark & Wild,* the group's first full-length album released in 2014. Right: *Map of the Soul: Persona,* the first mini-album in the *Map of the Soul* series in 2019

However, in BTS's *Dark & Wild* era, something more interesting was happening; in order to break into the American music market, BigHit intentionally modelled BTS's image after stereotypes of the supposedly gangster, hardcore Black male popularised by American hip-hop. By intentionally playing with sexualized and racialized stereotypes, BigHit sought to make the group more marketable for a predominantly white American audience. These stereotypes are especially at play in the Mnet reality show, *American Hustle Life.* The

show-runners utilise Asian-non-Asian, masculine-feminine, and Black-white binaries to communicate a narrative arc in which the members of BTS absorb the qualities of their Black mentors and transform into macho, “authentic” hip-hop artists, thereby reaching success in America.

The show takes place in 2014, when the boys come to Los Angeles, California thinking they are there to train for the new album, *Dark & Wild*. They are surprised to discover that they will actually be filming a reality television program named *American Hustle Life,* in which they will each undergo strict training to “be born again as a true hip hop artist” (Shin and Han, Episode 1). This revelation comes in the form of a prank. After their manager leaves the seven members alone in a van, suspenseful music begins to play and three Black men emerge from the shadows of an abandoned parking lot. The men burst into the van, remove the members’ phones, and speed to Skid Row (a neighborhood in L.A. known for its large homeless population). None of the members seem to know that the kidnapping is staged, evident from their very real, unscripted terror (Shin and Han). The first episode of *American Hustle Life* depicts its Black men as large, hulking criminals, under whose sway the innocent members of BTS cower in fear. Though this image of Black masculinity is constructed by the show-runners to inspire terror and create conflict within the show, it also becomes a source of admiration, a guide into the world of hip-hop, and the locus of *darkness* and *wildness* which BTS (or at least BTS's management) wish for.

Fig. 2 BTS shortly after their debut in 2013: "BTS at Incheon Korean Music Wave Photocall." Myung-Gu Han, *WireImage*, 1 Sept. 2013.

This show, and especially the kidnapping scene in the first episode, made me deeply uncomfortable. As a child, when we went on a road trip to Atlanta, Georgia to visit my dad's family, we were held for hours at the Canadian-American border. My dad is Black, Jamaican-Canadian, and my mom is white. I suppose the makeup of our family must have looked suspicious to the border guards; a Black man driving a white woman and several seemingly white kids, automatically rendered a kidnapping narrative in the guards' minds. Years later, I could see how shows like *American Hustle Life* could construct an image of Black masculinity which teaches the same kind of fear to its viewers. After all, how was a young South Korean viewer of *American Hustle Life* supposed to know that the kidnapping scene was completely fabricated? Why did the show-runners of *American Hustle Life* have to repeat such damaging stereotypes to such an impressionable audience?

The answer to this question is multi-layered, making *American Hustle Life* and BTS's *Dark & Wild* era an especially interesting example of how race and gender stereotypes can become

exploitable cultural points of reference in the pursuit of economic gain. Moreover, *American Hustle Life* opens up discussion of how these stereotypes can create long lasting images of racialized and sexualized bodies within the racial imaginary. But before I go on to provide an in-depth analysis of *American Hustle Life,* some context is due for readers unfamiliar with BTS and the world of K-pop. In particular, why would BigHit want so badly for BTS to break into the American music market in the first place? And why has it been so difficult for BTS and other South Korean artists to do so?

BTS is not the first South Korean music act that has tried for success in the American music market. In fact, K-pop's ties to American consumers may link back to the 1950s, when after the Korean War, US soldiers became the primary consumers of popular music in South Korea:

> [M]usicians, young and old, would eagerly perform whatever American GIs wanted to hear [to the extent that] revenues from performances for US GIs probably exceeded the total export earnings of South Korea. (Lie 44)

John Lie, author of *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea,* argues that changes in South Korean popular music, and especially the birth of K-pop, are highly representative of a dramatic Westernization in South Korean culture in the past century. Due to Japanese colonialism before World War II and American occupation after the Korean War, the nation went through rapid economic growth based on an export imperative, especially to Western countries. This export imperative influenced South Korean popular culture as a whole, and it is this export imperative that is the logic of K-pop.

A unique characteristic of K-pop is that it "systematically [generates] accomplished acts that can appeal to audiences beyond national borders" (Lie 150), therefore, a large sign of a K-pop group's success is how well it can do in other countries. Furthermore, when K-pop originated, “the United States […] set the standard for popular

music" (Lie 142) and "the gold standard of power and prestige," (Lie 139) at least in the minds of young South Koreans. In short, K-pop's success is frequently marked by how well it does abroad, and the ultimate marker of success has always been the United States. After the birth of K-pop in the 1990s, Korean popular music successfully took roots in Japan, China, and other Asian countries. Yet as South Korean entertainment companies began setting their eyes on the big prize, the United States, or "the Everest" (Lie 127) of popular music industries:

> [T]heir attempts […] despite elaborate preparations, all fell short, confirming the complexity and unpredictability of contemporary transnational flows and the challenges of entrenched notions of *race, ethnicity, sexuality,* as well as musical sound in the mainstream American pop music market. (Jung 78, italics mine)

What are these notions of race, ethnicity, and sexuality, which make it so difficult for East Asian artists to make it in the American popular music market? Why is the physical body and sexual appeal of pop music artists so important in the K-pop industry?

For one thing, K-pop idol groups are far more than musicians; they are an aesthetic and an image of desirability. Because physical appearance is a cornerstone of their marketability, management puts huge importance on how K-pop idols look, especially with respect to their sexual attractiveness. Consider Rain (or *Bi*) for example, an extremely popular K-pop star in the early 2000s, and one of the first to attempt crossover success in America. Rain's manager, Jin-young Park (known as JYP), wanted an artist whose voice and body was suitable to become "the source of various marketable commodities […] from videogames to cosmetic goods" (Shin 512). According to Hyunjoon Shin in his essay, "Have you ever seen the Rain?" what made *Bi* so special was that he was able to embody hyper-masculinity and effeminacy simultaneously:

> [The] sexuality *Bi* embodied was different not only from the pretty boyishness but also from macho laddishness [...]

> Sometimes dubbed as urban metrosexuality, his sexuality received good responses from various media as a marketable commodity. (Shin 512)

Shin describes a racialized image of Rain's masculinity and his sexuality, positing that Rain's body was appealing because his "urban metrosexuality" was distinctly Asian. Yet, although Rain's supposed metrosexuality "was perceived as a good marketing point for [Rain and JYP] themselves, [that] 'Asianness' was never a merit to appeal to a non-Asian audience" (Shin 515). So although Rain's soft-yet-masculine persona was key to his success in East Asia, Rain was "too 'Asian' to be big in the US" (Shin 516). The case of Rain is evidence of how racialized and gendered bodies impact the export of K-pop to America. Perhaps this is because "popular images of Asian American men as geeky and undesirable" (Kao et. al) have conditioned Americans to view Asian men as unattractive. If K-pop boy bands market themselves primarily through visual appeal, then it follows that these groups would find it difficult to make a name for themselves within the dominant American music industry.

At first glance, an exception to this prejudice seems to be Psy, who for a brief period was one of the most talked about artists across the globe. In 2012, Psy's "Gangnam Style" went viral, becoming the most watched YouTube video in the world, in which Psy plays a goofy caricature of a "Gangnam style" man to make a satirical point about classism in modern day South Korea. Following this, Psy made appearances on multiple American talk shows, and his song inspired a torrent of covers and parodies. Though significant, Psy was not a sign for celebration for many Asian-Americans, as his exceptional popularity was due to exploitation and mimicry rather than appreciation. Even though Psy was popular, he was never a true candidate for lasting American stardom. Instead, he was a *dispensable celebrity:*

> It's precisely that imminent expiry [of dispensability], accentuated by the perceived alienness of Psy and the

> "Gangnam Style" video itself, that accelerated so much creativity, debate, explanation, grievance, suspicion, anxiety, and celebration in late 2012. Before it inevitably vanishes, exploit it, mimic it, dissect it as an allegory for our troubles. Caught in the middle of it all were Asian Americans, a group already marginalized and made invisible in the American mainstream, suddenly lumped together with the ubiquitous Psy and his looming disappearance. (Hu 230)

Psy was often brought onto American television shows for the purpose of teaching primarily white celebrities how to do the horse dance, not to actually talk about his music and the meaning behind it. In reality, most Americans did not "have any idea what Psy [was] rapping about," ("Rapper living 'Gangnam style' goes viral") or the satirical message behind "Gangnam Style." Rather, what they found funny was Psy himself:

> What is missing from much commentary on Psy's video is the existing American cultural context that embraces stereotypes of Asians while rejecting more realistic portrayals. [...] I think more people are laughing at Psy than laughing with him. ("What Does Gangnam Style Mean for (The) US?").

Hence, although Psy is now a superstar in South Korea, with his own record label to boot, his brief stint of popularity in America did not land him as a "legitimate" celebrity in the West. Rather, his rapid rise and fall from fame only solidified the issues of Asian men's representations in American media; namely, how Asian men are only allowed into American popular media if they fulfill a highly stereotyped role.

In *The Tablo Podcast* Episode 15, Tablo (a South Korean rapper), Eddie Nam (Tablo's manager), and Eric Nam (a K-pop idol), discuss their experiences with this anti-Asian racism growing up in America, and how dismal representations of Asian people in American pop-culture have affected them. Of particular interest is their discussion of a video that circulated on YouTube several years prior, in which

an interviewer asked women on the streets if they would date an Asian man. Eddie Nam recounts that most of the women were disgusted, saying things like, “I'm not gonna date my Kumon teacher [...] Dr. Lim [...] hair stylist [etc.],” to which Eddie adds:

> And here’s the sad thing, we have nothing more to say because those are the roles that we are confined to. [...] I’m stopped after five occupations of what we’re supposed to be. “RACISM!”)

In this episode, Eddie identifies the ramifications of such sparse representations of Asian men in popular American media. In the American racial imaginary, Asian men can only exist in specific roles—tutors, doctors, and hair stylists—and little else. Furthermore, the roles which Asian men are allowed to play are almost always desexualized and demeaned. This on-screen depiction in turn, influences how dominant American society views Asian men offscreen. It is difficult to find exactly which video Eddie Nam was referring to, because so many like it exists.

A similar but different thing can be said for Asian women, who are frequently objectified and fetishized in American media for a white male gaze. The imaginary hypersexual Asian temptress in American media links to very real, physical violence. On March 16, 2021 a White man in Atlanta, Georgia targeted three Asian-owned spas, killing eight people: Hyun Jung Grant, Yong Yue, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Xiojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Delaina Ashley Yuan, and Paul Andre Michels. Six of these people were Asian women. When asked for his motivations, Robert Aaron Long said that he had a sex addiction and that the spas held a "temptation he wanted to eliminate" (Ramirez and Shimizu). The Atlanta shootings are directly connected to the history of sexualized representations of Asian women in American media, representations which produce “otherness, [alienation], and object status” (Ramirez and Shimizu). The extent of Asian women’s fetishization struck me when I was trying to search for news updates of Asian hate crimes in March 2021. I had content restrictions activated on my Apple device so that

I could restrict access to websites like YouTube and Pinterest (which are a constant distraction for me during essay-writing season). This iOS setting also restricts the searchability of adult content, key words that could be used to find pornography. When I typed in "violence against Asian people" my search was restricted, which I soon realized was because the word "Asian," in the AI mind of my iOS device, was a sexualized term.

The Atlanta shootings and the broader rise of Asian hate in 2020-2021 are startling examples of how images of racialized bodies within popular culture affect reality. The issue of Asian-American men's desirability and dating prospects may seem to lack in severity when compared to the fetishization of Asian-American women; however, I do think that the de-sexualization of Asian men is also closely linked to a white supremacist project that seeks to erase and delegitimize Asian-ness in the American mainstream. Whether one has experienced anti-Asian racism firsthand or not, this prejudice is undeniably deeply entrenched in the American racial imaginary. Thus, in the K-pop industry where an artist's marketability depends on their attractiveness, this racial prejudice does not bode well for male K-pop idols trying to make it big in the US where Asian-ness is systematically rejected and erased.[2]

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[2] This essay focuses mainly on how racialized masculinities operate in the sphere of K-pop, through the example of how BigHit and BTS have used stereotyped images of Black masculinity to make themselves more marketable within an American popular music market which systemically rejects Asian men. Many North Americans show stubborn disinterest towards Korean music, which I believe is symptomatic of how North American popular media systemically rejects Asian artists. Of course, this happens regardless of gender. An obvious blindside of this essay, then, is that I do not discuss how other groups, especially female K-pop acts, exploit Black stereotypes and aesthetics for similar reasons. My argument in this essay is that male K-pop groups struggle in America because Western media popularly depicts Asian men as desexualized, and that they try to overcome that barrier by appropriating stereotypical Black aesthetics which are hypersexualized. Female acts, especially on shows like Unpretty Rapstar (see "How Truedy Killed Yoon Mirae's Black

One explanation for such racial imaginary is perhaps best elaborated in what Edward W. Said has called Orientalism. According to Said, Orientalism "is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 2). The binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident becomes a way for the Occident (the West) to create its own identity, and also to wield power over the Orient (the East) through colonial exploits. In other words, the Occident would not exist without the Orient, and it is beneficial for the West to continually characterize the East by its "eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, [and] its supine malleability" (Said 206). In Orientalist thought, the Orient is feminine, and therefore penetrable for colonial rule and exploitation. Furthermore, by feminizing the Orient, the Occident becomes more masculine in contrast, which, in Western heteropatriarchal thought, means that the Occident is superior and dominating. For this reason, Asian women are repeatedly fetishized for a white male gaze in Western media, treated as sexual objects, docile and submissive. For Asian men, this means that they are repeatedly represented as effeminate, silly, and easily conquerable in American popular media. In this way, binaries of Occident-Orient, Male-Female, and colonizer-colonized, are intimately entangled.

Besides Orientalism, white Western powers have used other racialized binaries to consolidate a favorable identity for themselves. One of these binaries is, of course, the Black-white binary. According to writers such as Toni Morrison, the construction of

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Happiness"), also appropriate stereotyped Black aesthetics. The reasons for this are likely not synonymous with the arguments I have made in this essay. This topic is doubtlessly complex, extending in ways that this essay does not consider, and it would be an interesting path for further research. Crystal S. Anderson, author of Soul in Seoul: African American Popular Music and K-pop, is a valuable resource for further research in the topic.

Blackness in early American Gothic literature was instrumental in creating awhite American identity:

> [C]ultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature, and [what] seemed to be on the 'mind' of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man. […] There was a very theatrical difference underfoot. Writers were able to celebrate or deplore an identity already existing or rapidly taking a form that was elaborated through racial difference. That difference provided a huge payout of sign, symbol, and agency in the process of organizing, separating, and consolidating identity across culturally valuable lines of interest. (Morrison 39)

In other words, through binary-formation one can create what one *is* by also creating what one is *not.* Through the repetition of representation, Blackness came to embody the fears and anxieties of white America, so as to create a desirable image of White America by contrast; a white American that was light and civilized, rather than dark and wild. Similar to how Oriental binaries create an image of Asian men that is desexualized, effeminate, and weak, white supremacist binaries create an image of Black men that could be "seen as epitomizing [a] promise of wildness, of unlimited physical prowess and unbridled eroticism" (hooks 376). Though these images of Blackness and whiteness were created during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they still remain in the American racial imaginary, and by necessity, in American popular media. *American Hustle Life* is not an American production, but one can still see both the hyper-masculine, eroticized Black man, as well as the desexualized, effeminate Asian man in the show's narrative. In fact, the show clearly contains its own binary-formation, albeit in a rather peculiar way.

As a disclaimer, I doubt that the seven members of BTS (Kim Namjoon, Kim Seokjin, Min Yoongi, Jung Hoseok, Park Jimin, Kim Taehyung, and Jeon Jungkook) had much say in the contents of the

show. For K-pop artists so early in their career, it would have been unusual for them to have much of a say in any of the variety shows they took part in. Rather, it is safe to conclude that much of the binary-formation comes from post-filming editing and narration. Before the kidnapping prank takes place, the creators of the show form a dichotomy between BTS and their Black captors, in which BTS are juvenile and effeminate, and their captors are dangerous and hyper-masculine.

At the beginning of the first episode, an interviewer asks the members to define hip-hop, to which none gives an adequate answer. First, they ask the leader of the group, RM (who at the time went by the name 'Rap Monster'), to define hip-hop. He says, "I think it's just an air-like giant, like it's floating around but you can't see it." Then the scene cuts to RM dancing on a rooftop, toddler music playing overhead, while the narrator asks sarcastically, "Rapmon, what does [hip-hop], that's floating in the air, feel like? I'm curious" (Shin and Han). When member Jungkook replies that "[hip-hop] is… black. Confidence is really important," the scene then cuts to Jungkook dancing to a girl group's song, as the narrator scoffs: "[Yeah,] show us more of that confidence of yours for girl group dances" (Shin and Han). Finally, the interviewers ask member V the same question. After hesitating, he replies something along the lines of, "Coolness." The scene then switches to V and Jin in the gym, curling small pink dumbbells. The narrator says, in a sarcastic tone, "are you talking about swag? [We're *definitely*] able to see your swag through your pink weights." As Jin, the oldest member of BTS, moves onto heavier weights, the camera zooms in as he struggles to lift them, and a subtitle reads, "Showing his coolness(?) with his thin arms?" (Shin and Han).

This opening segment of *American Hustle Life* introduces a conflict in the show's narrative arc; the members cannot truly embody hip-hop because they are perceived to be in opposition with it. The scene of RM dancing on the rooftop, with childish music playing in

the background, characterizes him as juvenile. Jungkook, dancing to girl group songs, is made out to seem effeminate (which is also linked here to lacking self-confidence). Jin and V are depicted as weak—the pink dumbbells also signifying effeminacy, which then puts into question their coolness. In my mind, none of these things is inherently connected (for instance, effeminacy does not mean a lack of confidence, and there are surely cool people who are physically weak). However, the show runners deliberately make those connections, so as to put BTS in opposition with a peculiar idea of American hip-hop. They cannot be true hip-hop artists, because they are too childish, too effeminate, too weak. In contrast, hip-hop is characterized as mature, self-confident, cool, masculine, and *black.*

Along with playing up BTS's effeminacy, the creators of the show also construct an exaggerated image of Black male dangerousness in the kidnapping scene, which occurs later in the first episode. The creators set a suspenseful tone with music reminiscent of *Jaws*, and the actors go over-the-top in their intimidation of BTS. They even get one actor, dressed as a homeless man, to pound at the windows screaming for money. He has a staged fight with one of the captors, before BTS leave the van to enter the apartment. Inside, the members are all told to take off their shoes, and the camera zooms in on a teary-eyed Jungkook, who is being mocked by the kidnappers for wearing super-hero socks. Later Jungkook admits that "at that moment [he] started to think about [his] Mom and Dad" (Shin and Han). The kidnapping scene is excessive, but its purpose is clear: to juxtapose BTS against their Black captors, highlighting how young, innocent, and naïve the members are, and how powerful, dangerous, and masculine the Black men are.

The show then follows the group as they go through the rigors of the "American Hustle Life School of Hip Hop," learning the history of hip-hop, break-dancing, and beatboxing. In Episode 5, mentors Tony and Nate share skills with BTS on how to "catch girls" to be in their

music video. Nate prefaces that "these skills that we're about to teach y'all, they should not be used for personal gain" (Shin and Han), as if to suggest that the two men hold the key to female attraction.

Episode 7 also presents similar interests. In the episode, BTS are split up into three groups to work: Jungkook and Jimin clean airplanes at an airbase, J-hope, V, and Jin clean a boat, and RM and Suga clean hotels. The work is designed to “show them how to do the true American Hustle” (Shin and Han). All of them find the work to be rather demeaning. After a day of hard labor, instead of keeping their earnings, they use their money to buy food for the homeless in Skid Row. The interesting thing about this episode is how, unlike the first episode which is full of paid actors who portray a fabricated image of Black men, this episode is full of real people. These are individuals with different life stories, sharing their experiences and their advice with the group. RM says, as they walk away, “surely, compared to what we thought, it didn’t feel dangerous.” Suga replies, “yeah, I don't think it’s that kind of place at all” (Shin and Han). Deeper within the show are moments that resist negative stereotypes about Black men, when RM and Suga realize that their preconceptions about Skid Row and its large Black homeless population, did not match up to reality.

There are definitely positive moments throughout the show—moments that contest stereotypes about Black masculinity. However, the overarching narrative remains reliant on historically racist binary constructions of identity, and this narrative is neatly tied up in the final episode where BTS has its first American performance. The group displays their newfound hip-hop skills to a 200-person audience, rapping in both Korean and English, showing off powerful dance moves, and hanging in gold chains and diamonds. They adopt a hard, macho exterior in all black and leather that goes with their music full of deep bass lines and gunshot beats. The audience loves it, demanding an encore at the end of the show.

The series concludes with BTS exchanging heartfelt goodbyes with Nate and Tony before leaving L.A. to return to South Korea. Notably, RM says:

> At first, I had a lot of thoughts that there would be prejudice. 'Because they were born here, they're in the biggest music industry, and they're true artists who dipped their feet in the place where hip hop really started,' I thought that there would be prejudice between us. But the moment we met, you guys treated us the same as any other. (Shin and Han, Episode 8)

To me, this *prejudice* refers to RM's feeling of being an outsider in America, and the possibility of getting outright rejection for no reason other than being Asian. RM, like the creators of the show, is vividly aware of how xenophobia and anti-Asian attitudes towards South Koreans, makes them into perpetual outsiders. This show is about them overcoming that outsider-ness. In order to do this, the show runners reiterate Orientalist and white Supremacist binaries (binaries which are culturally entrenched and intelligible to a wide audience) in order to create a simple narrative arc in which BTS acquire a marketable identity.

However, instead of creating a binary so as to contrast BTS against an undesirable Other, BTS exists in a binary in which *they* are the undesirable Other, and the goal of the show is for them to absorb the qualities of their hip-hop mentors. As shown in the first episode, this narrative is highly problematic. Firstly, it requires the reiteration of Orientalist attitudes towards Asian men: the members of BTS are juvenile, effeminate, and unable to embody hip-hop, which in contrast, is characterized as mature, cool, hypermasculine, and desired. In a heteropatriarchal sense, it also paints effeminacy as lesser. Furthermore, the creators reinforce stereotypes about Black men (that they are macho, violent, and hypersexual) in order to form a narrative in which BTS can absorb those fabricated attributes. The result, at least in the narrative of *American Hustle Life,* is crossover success through a racialized masculinization of BTS.

Does the narrative arc of *American Hustle Life* correlate with the reality of BTS's rise to fame in America? Was the adoption of a pseudo-Black, hip-hop masculinity, the key to crossover success? Well, yes and no. Of course, the group's rise to popularity was not dependent on one sole factor, but their kick-start of success was definitely in part thanks to the hip-hop aesthetic they embodied. In 2013 - 2014, directly before and during *American Hustle Life,* BTS had a very macho hip-hop concept, an aesthetic that dabbled in a highly constructed image of Black masculinity. This is particularly evident in RM's early stylization. RM, the leader and the only English speaker of the group, on several occasions boasted a talent for being able to speak "Black English," such as on Mnet variety show, *Beatles Code 3D.* Prompted by the show host, Rap Monster gives a short, unintelligible demonstration, after which the host tells him, "suddenly, your skin tone seems darker" (Mnet K-POP). In 2013 RM also sported dreadlocks (Fig. 4) and a chemically permed afro (Fig. 3):

Fig. 3 Rap Monster with a chemical afro. "Rap Monster in 2013." *Dispatch News Group*, 13 Jun. 2017.

Fig. 4 Rap Monster in an appropriative hairstyle. "Rap Monster in dreadlocks." *Dispatch News Group,* 13 Jun. 2017.

RM, as the leader of BTS and their primary speaker, was meant to represent the group's aesthetic. This aesthetic was tied up in a very specific stereotype of Black masculinity that is frequently circulated in popular culture, and which is associated with coolness, hypermasculinity, aggression, and hip-hop. The aesthetic of their debut music videos (Fig. 5 and 6) follows along with this concept:

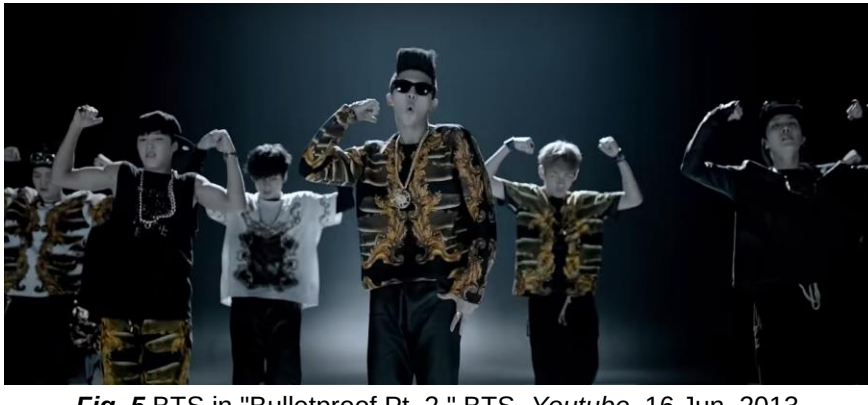

Fig. 5 BTS in "Bulletproof Pt. 2." BTS, *Youtube,* 16 Jun. 2013.

Fig. 6 BTS in "No More Dream." BTS, *Youtube,* 13 Jun. 2013.

However, moving past *American Hustle Life* and the *Dark & Wild* era, BTS's aesthetic slowly began to change. For instance, by 2016, the group had entered the "Blood Sweat and Tears" era, which was full of baroque-style suits, ruffled necklines, and velvet collars (Fig. 7). In 2017, "DNA" made a splash, with a hypnotic music video full of flashy, sequined jackets and colorful street wear (Fig. 8). In 2019, the group wore pastel pink silk in their music video for "Boy With Luv" (Fig. 9), and more recently, the music video for "Dynamite" featured the group in vibrant, retro clothing (Fig. 10):

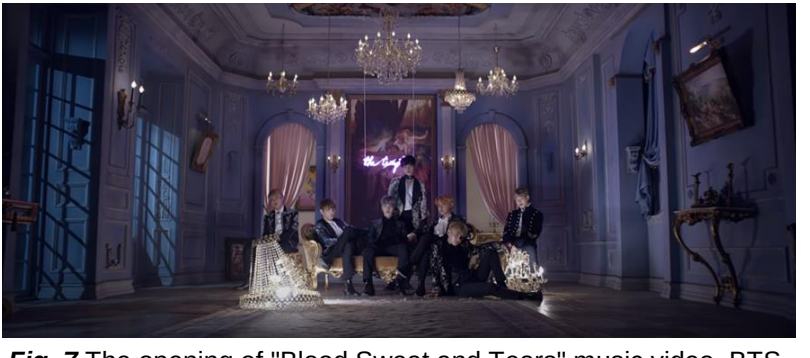

Fig. 7 The opening of "Blood Sweat and Tears" music video. BTS, *Youtube,* 9 Oct. 2016.

Fig. 8 The opening of "DNA" music video. BTS, *Youtube,* 18 Sept. 2017.

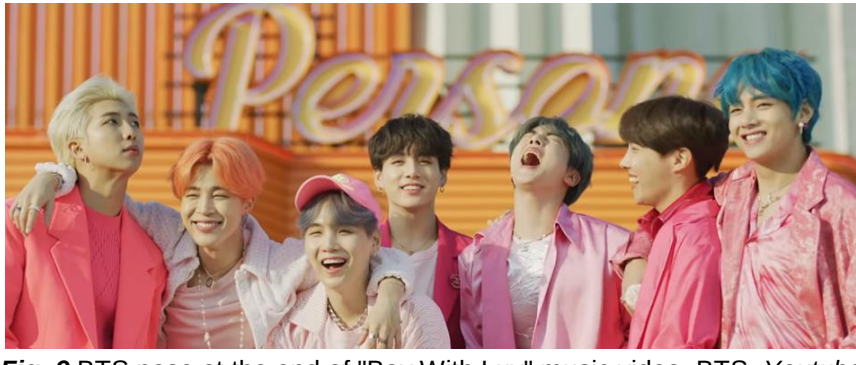

Fig. 9 BTS pose at the end of "Boy With Luv" music video. BTS, *Youtube,* 12 Apr. 2019.

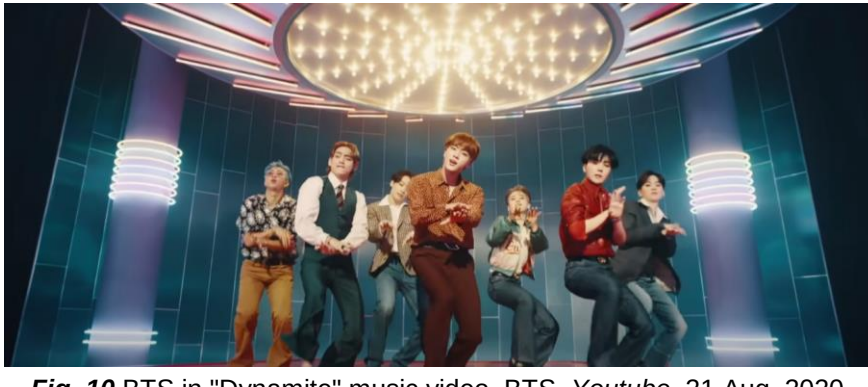

Fig. 10 BTS in "Dynamite" music video. BTS, *Youtube,* 21 Aug. 2020.

All this is to show that BTS has switched to styles that are not directly inspired by stereotypes of Black masculinity. This aesthetic change may seem at odds with the narrative arc of *American Hustle Life* (in which even a set of pink dumbbells was associated with femininity and therefore scoffed at). They are still frequently criticized by the West for being too effeminate (such as when an American right-wing YouTuber called them a "Korean lesbian pop group," which stirred up outrage online (Elizabeth)). Despite current criticism, they are no longer interested in a hypermasculine aesthetic. This does not necessarily mean that their pseudo-Black, stereotypical, hip-hop aesthetic was not a part of their rise to success, though. Bang Shi Hyuk, the head of BigHit Entertainment and the creator of BTS, stated that Black music was always the base of BTS, as a way to "[lower] the entry barrier to Western markets" (Do). Likewise, although *American Hustle Life* can be interpreted in a variety of ways, I think that there was clear intention on the part of the show runners and BTS's management to use an intentionally constructed image of Black masculinity for the purpose of making BTS more marketable for an American audience, therefore lowering the barriers of "entrenched notions of race, ethnicity, [and] sexuality" (Jung 78) that have prevented K-pop acts from making it big in the United States.

Perhaps as the group's fanbase became more racially diverse, and as they worked with more Black artists in the States, BigHit and BTS were forced to become more educated about race in America, and decided to ditch the appropriative styles. For instance, for the 2018 Billboard Music Awards, the group edited their "Fake Love" lyrics so as to remove words such as *naega* and *niga,* which in Korean mean *I* or *my,* but for an English-speaking audience could be mistaken for the N-word. RM explained the change, saying that it was "to the point of not ruining how it sounds" (D. Kim). Though the group seems to have expanded their social awareness, one more likely reason for the change of style was a switch in marketing tactics. Perhaps, the change in their aesthetic got better responses from fans, or perhaps

their enormous global fanbase offered them a safety net. They do not have to make performances of masculinity for an American audience because their success and popularity now speaks for itself, no matter what they are wearing.

I write this essay not to completely denounce BTS. I have been a fan myself since I was a teenager. They are incredibly talented artists who deserve to be celebrated, and I think that it is important that an East Asian act has been so successful in the United States and elsewhere across the globe. Simply by being present in the American popular music market, they are offering Asian representation where there was little before. Perhaps, they are even causing subtle shifts in how Asian masculinity is viewed in American psyche. In *The Tablo Podcast* previously mentioned, Eddie Nam specifies that the racist video he watched was created "before the BTS explosion," ("RACISM!") as though suggesting that if the same interview was done presently, answers might be significantly different.

However, the group's "dark" past still lingers in my memory, and instead of pushing that past aside, I decided to stop and analyze why it made me so uncomfortable. Some of BTS's fans are also addressing these issues, (such as Adeola Ash and her video "BTS Racism, Cultural Appropriation, Colorism & Cultural Insensitivity"). However, in my own experience as a fan on the internet, the majority of ARMY (the name for BTS's fans) gives little attention to the questionable moments in BTS's career, let alone problematizes them. I do not see how this refusal to acknowledge the issue of racism in BTS and K-pop more broadly is at all constructive, as racialized and gendered stereotypes will always show up in popular media and there is no use ignoring them. As I have outlined with the examples from Said and Morrison, narratives that set up binaries between social groups, so as to consolidate a favourable identity for one party, is heavily implicated in Orientalist and white supremacist thought. *American Hustle Life* is a potent example of how these

binary narratives work, and how such narratives are continuing to shape the racial imaginary in today's popular culture. Especially in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020, and the Atlanta Spa Shootings in 2021, it seems vitally important to view popular media depictions of racialized and gendered bodies under a critical lens. If pop music, television, film, literature, and other forms of popular media are the bricks and mortar of the American racial imaginary, then the first step to changing that imaginary is by thinking critically about the material with which it is made.

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Episode 1, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7x1s8u;
Episode 5, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7x3pbh;
Episode 7, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7wycho:
and Episode 8,
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