

“THE NAME WE GAVE TO STRUGGLE AND PAIN”: RACIALIZED SPACE AND AUTHENTICITY IN TABLO’S “HOOD”

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On August 28, 2015, Korean entertainment industry giant YG Entertainment released the cover jacket for the collaboration project between Korean hip-hop star Tablo (타블로) and Brooklyn rapper Joey Bada\$\$\$. The cover jacket is simple yet eye-catching. It consists of two broken coins stacked on each other. One of the coins is a Korean 100 won, and the other is an American half-dollar. The coins are stacked so they appear to have become one; however, this oneness is undermined by the coins' jagged edges. The image of the jagged but connected coins is imprinted on an all-black background. The black background is given depth through a faint rippling on the corner edges. These ripples give the impression of a dark, unfathomable sea. Through this visual iconography, the cover jacket effectively communicates the central themes of the song “Hood.” The two coins indicate both rappers' preoccupation with the hustle to provide financially and the burden of success. The black ocean that makes up the background alludes to the meeting of these two artists, one representing his hood in Seoul and the other in Brooklyn but bound together across oceans by the sonic articulation of Blackness in hip hop. In this article, I analyze how the song draws on signifiers of urban living in Seoul to represent Korea, invokes an essentialized Korean identity founded on the Korean sentiments of jeong (정/情)¹ and han (한/恨), and deploys Black introspection as a reprieve from the psychic exhaustion of urban living. In doing so, I argue that Tablo not only authenticates himself as both Korean and a rapper, but he also invites listeners to hear the parallels and differences between Black American and Korean experiences of disenfranchisement in the city.

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Authenticity and The Persistent Rivalry Between K-pop and K-Hip Hop

Since the term Korean Wave (한류, *hallyu*) was first coined by Chinese fans of South Korean music and media in the 1990s, Korean cultural products have taken the world by storm. From K-dramas (Korean Television) and K-pop (Korean Popular Music) to K-beauty (Korean skincare and beauty products) and K-food, Korean media has become a staple in global popular culture. This has presented challenges and opportunities for hip-hop artists in South Korea. K-hip hop and K-pop share similar origins. Both were heavily influenced by the “rap dance” genre performed by artists such as Hyun Jin Young and Wawa and Seo Taiji and the Boys², creating a symbiotic relationship between the two genres (Kim 2019).

For example, mainstream K-hip hop acts such as Epik High and Dynamic Duo utilize promotion and engagement strategies nearly identical to K-pop entertainment agencies (Anderson 2020, 122). There are also frequent label crossovers between K-hip hop and K-pop. Furthermore, competition reality shows such as *Show Me The Money* (쇼미더머니) and *Unpretty Rapstar* (언프리티 랩스타) have provided avenues for Korean rappers to achieve recognition on television broadcasts, similar to the music channels K-pop idols perform on (Song 2019, 9). Despite these connections, K-hip hop distinguishes itself by adopting not only the aesthetics and sound of hip-hop, as K-pop does, but also carrying on hip-hop's impetus to narrativize authentic tales of self and community, critique politics and power, and prioritize self-authored lyrics.

Nevertheless, the interconnectedness of the K-pop and K-hip hop industries has led many to question the authenticity of mainstream Korean hip-hop artists and Korean hip-hop writ large. Therefore, not unlike American hip-hop, the question of authenticity is central to the production of hip-hop music in Korea. What determines an authentic Korean rapper? Is it musical composition and lyrical flow? Is it upholding the impulse to provide social critique and commentary (Rose 1994)? These questions come up frequently in the discussion and analysis of K-hip hop. And scholars have already addressed how Korean rappers emphasize style (Hare and Baker 2017), language (Kim 2021), aesthetics (Anderson 2020), and race (Kim 2023) as critical indicators of authenticity in Korean hip-hop. In this paper, I argue that Tablo draws on the spatial narratives of hood common to hip-hop culture to authenticate himself as a Korean and a rapper. In his verse, Tablo uses the imagery of urban life in Seoul to integrate South Korea into the spatial imaginings of the global hip-hop nation. Furthermore, Tablo utilizes the homophonic pronunciations of "han" to connect Seoul to the ethnic identity of Koreans everywhere.

Authenticity through Space

The interconnectedness of the K-pop and K-hip hop industries can be seen in Tablo's story. Known as both Daniel and Seon-Woong Lee, Tablo is the leader of the South Korean hip-hop group Epik High. The group is a pioneer in the Korean hip-hop scene, and this fame carried with it scrutiny of identity. In 2010, an internet group accused Tablo of fabricating his academic background. Due to his down-to-earth demeanor, fluency in Korean, and other factors, Korean netizens refused to believe he went to Stanford (Lee and Lo 2017). Following the scandal, Tablo and Epik High signed with YG Entertainment. As indicated in this brief history, Tablo's music career has been influenced by questions of authenticity and the infrastructural connections of K-hip hop and K-pop. Therefore, it is appropriate to consider his single, released after the scandal and transition to YG Entertainment, a re-articulation of authenticity according to the entanglements of race and space represented in rap music.

In *The Hood Comes First*, Murray Forman argues the importance of recognizing the spatial components of rap and hip hop. Forman argues that rap music constitutes a distinct discursive space or counter-public for Black and Latinx youth to challenge hegemonic discourse and serves as a spatial narrative (19). A spatial narrative refers to a story, account, or tale that emphasizes location to anchor the narrative. Due to the impulse to "keep it real" and deliver authentic accounts of the Black American experience, rap and hip-hop often provide detailed accounts of urban spaces. Because of this focus on the urban landscape, scholars have gone so far as to describe hip hop as urban research (Black 2014). As "urban researchers," rappers provide detailed accounts of a location through the narrative accounts of their everyday experiences of the place.

Furthermore, by discussing their experiences in local hoods, streets, and cities, they utilize “place as a lens that mediates one’s perspective on social relations (Forman 2000, 78).” This impetus to describe one’s life experience through spatial awareness is a prevailing theme in Black music. Through the musical narratives of Black music, such as rap, hip hop, bebop, and soul, the city as the center of urban life is inscribed with the characteristics of Blackness invoked in the music. In other words, the spatial narratives in Black music participate in racializing space even as they describe how space is racialized (Forman 2000, 13). This practice of “racializing space” and “spatializing race” is evident in the prevalence of a distinct geographic lexicon within hip-hop and rap (Ibid 12). Terms such as the “ghetto,” “hood,” “bloc,” and even “homies” are all geographic markers that communicate the experiences of racialized subjects in urban spaces.

The prevalence of spatial narratives in rap music is not limited to African-American hip-hop. As hip-hop spreads worldwide, through spatial references to distinct geographic markers, cities across the world become “enemies” and “witnesses” to the marginalization, discrimination, inequality, and poverty that often make up life in urban spaces (Kniaż 2017, 117). For example, due to consistent abuse of authority and the suffocation of creative minds, K-hip hop commonly identifies the classroom as a ghetto (Kim 2021, 95). Additionally, the psychological stress from cultural expectations to take care of the family and fulfill one’s filial duties even at the cost of one’s dream creates a “psychological ghetto” that is repeatedly discussed in Korean rap (Ibid 112). Similarly, Korean rapper Tablo uses the verses in his song “Hood” to position Seoul as the hood.

The song opens with an acoustic sampling of the sounds of Seoul. A cacophonous jumble of multiple voices makes it difficult to make out what is being said, but it is clear from the overlapping of voices, chimes, footsteps, and faint Korean that this is the sound of street vendors and traffic that make up the city of Seoul. This allusion to the soundscapes of Seoul continues through the lyrics of Tablo’s first verse. He identifies critical geographic landmarks such as the Han River and explicitly calls out the neighborhood of Hongdae. Furthermore, Tablo identifies specific experiences that represent local life in Seoul, such as “cramped buses” and the heartfelt sacrifice of his parents as they struggle to provide for him. He raps that Seoul as a city can be found in “the price that our ‘아빠 (dad)’s’ paid to buy food for the children” and “the bottom of the pot when our ‘엄마 (mom)’s’ got that hot ‘된장국 (soybean paste soup)’ in the kitchen.”³ Through these sonic and lyrical references, Tablo not only describes the urban landscape as an “urban researcher,” but he does so by highlighting the specific affective affinities associated with the space. In doing so, Tablo builds his hood on two distinct Korean signifiers, “jeong (정/情)” and “han (한/恨).” Jeong can be loosely defined as the “warm feeling of attachment felt between people who share a close relationship (KnowingKorea, n.d.).” The term references what is often considered a uniquely Korean “emotional and psychological bond (Chung and Cho 2006, 46).” Tablo’s description of his father’s dedication to providing for his family and his mother’s labor are examples of jeong — namely mojeong (between mother and children) and bujeong (between father and children). In highlighting these experiences as representative of his hood, Tablo “keeps it real” by sharing his testimony and identifying a more generalized abstract experience that other Koreans in Seoul could identify with. Moreover, jeong as a type of emotional and psychological attachment is not limited to living beings — someone can have jeong for an object or a place. Through the sample of Seoul’s soundscape and the identification of Seoul with the fond experiences of mojeong and bujeong, Tablo imbues the soundscape of Seoul with the affection he feels towards the security of home represented in his parents’ sacrifice. Just as his parents arduously work to support him, so too does the city of Seoul. As he raps, “this [Han] river runs through our city like it runs through our veins,” suggesting that the Han River, a landmark explicitly tied to the representation of Seoul, sustains him just like the blood in his veins. Thus, he identifies two spaces of belonging that he feels jeong for — the

family home and his home city of Seoul. This designation of Seoul as home is embodied in the song's title. As Murray Forman notes, within the context of rap music, the 'hood, short for the neighborhood, is "regularly constructed within the discursive frame of the 'home (Forman 2000, 72)."

Just as many hip-hop artists worldwide latch on to stereotypical representations of "urban" life in the form of crime, drugs, and the sexualization of women, others like Tablo draw inspiration from the impulse to express the actual conditions of struggle in the city. Tablo does this in his song "Hood" by connecting the geographic imagery of Seoul to the life-giving force of family and home. In doing so, he envisions his hood as both a geographic designation and an abstract experience indicative of a Korean emotional and psychological condition. As such, Tablo's "Hood" complicates many of the accusations against Korean hip-hop, such as how Korean rappers are "posers" or blind imitators of American hip-hop swagger. Instead of forcing anger from "nothing," he articulates the context of his anger as the individual trials of poverty (Youn 2017). However, Tablo does not only describe the city in terms of jeong. Through his focus on working-class lifestyles and the motif of struggle and pain, he also identifies the indigenous Korean concept of han as a foundation for framing Seoul as a distinctly Korean hood.

Authenticity through Race

Following the sample of Seoul's lively soundscape are gentle, rhythmic notes on the piano, followed by Tablo's voice. Tablo begins his verse with the proclamation of "where I'm from," followed directly by the word "Han." He explains what han is but not before pausing between the words "han" and "is." This pause in the first verse and the repetition of the term "han" throughout the song suggests that the heart of Tablo's hood is han. Han (한/恨), like jeong, is considered a distinct emotional and psychological experience unique to Koreans. It is considered a biological and cultural signifier of one's Korean identity. In the simplest terms, han refers to the collective feeling of suffering, sorrow, regret, and anger that is thought to be inherited and inherent to all Koreans (Kim 2023, 146). However, scholars have pointed out that this conflation between han and Koreanness flattens the complex relationship between dynamic socio-historical experiences such as the long-standing tradition of tributary ties, colonial modernization, post-colonial developmental dictatorship, financial crises and reflexive formations of Korean consciousness into cultural essentialism and biological determinism based on a perceived homogeneity of Korean society (Kim 2017, Han 2021).

In his verses, Tablo draws on these essentialist depictions of Korean identity. For example, he states, "This [Han] river runs through the city like it runs through our veins." On the one hand, this statement reflects his jeong for his city. Still, on the other, it reflects identification with biological (blood) and cultural (han) signifiers of an ethnic Korean identity. Tablo does not stop at acknowledging han as a biological and cultural indicator of Koreanness. He also demonstrates how han becomes a reference point for a particular sociopolitical experience grounded in a working-class lifestyle. In the same verse, he states, "We said shotgun to it [han], wishing that it takes us, navigates us to a better living." Tablo references the passenger seat of a car through the colloquial term shotgun and suggests that han sits in the passenger seat of the car called Life, navigating Koreans to a "better living." In other words, he identifies how han operates as an ontological experience of Koreanness and a sociopolitical lens that frames how Koreans experience economic precarity in Seoul's urban spaces. Tablo goes on further to discuss how han drives Korean Seoulites

towards “money, love, and kings,” enabling them to get “ahead” or go “insane.” Han represents a response to the suffering of “cramped buses” and endless “graveyard shifts.” It produces an awareness of injustice and suffering but also propels one to persevere despite that suffering. It creates a people who “may be broke but never broken.” For Tablo, this han is a pain carried and shared by all Koreans, creating a resilience that allows them to endure the alienation and exhaustion of poverty in Seoul. Furthermore, this dialectic between han as pain and han as resilience characterizes the jeong or attachment one feels for the city of Seoul. In the hook of the song, Tablo raps, “Some call it pain, but we call it ‘사랑 (love).” This is a love for Seoul as a physical materialization of the biological, cultural, and sociopolitical experience of Koreanness. This understanding of Seoul as a racialized geographic marker of Koreanness is further emphasized through Tablo’s playful use of the homophonic meanings of han in the Korean language.

The short syllable han has several meanings in Korean culture. It is the name of the river (한강) that runs through Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. It also designates Korea and Koreans as in hanguk (한국) and hangugeo (한국어). Although these three “hans” may be derived from different hanja, the homophonic nature of their pronunciation and the ways they are intimately tied to notions of Koreanness is why Tablo asserts in the song that “han” runs through the city just as it runs through “our [Korean people] veins.” Tablo further defines the han that runs through the city of Seoul and the veins of its inhabitants as “the name we gave to struggle and pain.” The conflation of the Han River as a geographic marker of South Korea with the concept of han, which is a racial and national signifier of Koreanness as equal ingredients to the blood in the veins of all Koreans serve to effectively racialize Seoul while revealing how concepts of race are tied to space in Korea. By interchangeably using the homophones of “han” in his song, Tablo creates a spatial narrative of Seoul that authenticates his identity as ethnically Korean.

From Resilience to Rest

This paper has considered the relationship between race and space in the song “Hood,” produced by CODE KNUST and performed by Tablo. The paper has argued that Tablo, drawing on a tradition of rappers as “urban researchers,” constructs an image of Seoul as defined by the twin Korean sentiments of han and jeong. In doing so, he participates in racializing the Seoul cityscape and authenticating himself as a Korean rapper. However, Tablo’s voice is not the only one heard in the song. Black Brooklyn native Joey Bada\$\$ also features on the track. If Tablo’s allusions to Seoul, jeong, and han center on a uniquely Korean hood, what is Joey Bada\$\$’s role? To conclude this paper, I reflect on the jagged and uneven integration of Black interiority and Korean identity as another tool for understanding authenticity in the context of the song.

Jo-Vaughn Virginie Scott, more popularly known by his stage name Joey Bada\$\$, is a Brooklyn-based rapper known for his smooth flow and introspective lyrics. He released his first mixtape in 2012 and has made a name for himself as a rapper, songwriter, and actor. Joey Bada\$\$’s verse begins with the stereotypical braggadocio often associated with commercial rap. He rushedly and boldly declares that he has “been rap supreme.” His verse continues along these lines, with him bragging about his rap skills, his lavish lifestyle, and his sexual prowess. However, between the “furs and designers” and the “nice mami” from Miami, Joey borrows the words of hip-hop legend the Notorious B.I.G. to make a vulnerable confession: “Mo’ money” means “mo’ headaches.” This tension between financial increase and internal headaches pervades Joey Bada\$\$’s verse and hook. He mentions a sexy woman who dressed up just to “kill herself in the mirror” for a selfie. He

laments all those who have lost their lives in the hustle of economic struggle. This turn towards the emotional, mental, and physical harms one endures trying to make it in the city should be considered in light of shifting definitions of authenticity in the American rap scene.

Beginning in the 2000s, the hip-hop mandate to “keep it real” shifted away from rappers as journalists who report the experiences of living in the ghetto to an invitation to explore the psychic tolls of urban life on Black male rappers (2020, Forman). Forman discusses the rise of online shows such as *The Therapist* and rappers such as J. Cole, Drake, Jay-Z, and a variety of “SoundCloud rappers” willing to discuss depression, anxiety, and loneliness in their songs as examples of an introspective turn in hip hop. This turn inwards in rap music is indicative of the contemporary mental health crisis plaguing Black youth in particular and the Black community broadly (ibid, 17-18). By sharing stories of their emotional and psychological experiences in the face of systemic racism, economic inequality, and violence, rappers create an intimate space of introspection and vulnerability that offers an opportunity to process and heal (ibid, 12). Joey Bada\$\$’s verse in the song “Hood” exemplifies this turn inward as an invitation to process and heal. Tablo’s corroboration of this turn inward signifies that he, unlike Korean rappers who reproduce stereotypes of violence, life in the ghetto, and (Black) masculinity as the signifiers of authentic hip hop, considers the vulnerable retelling of emotional experience and raw depiction of precarity as the definers of “authentic” hip hop. This emphasis on emotional vulnerability is evident in the melancholy tone of the song. The beat is mid-tempo, and the song includes the sounds of piano and saxophone, creating an easy listening experience similar to soft jazz. This sonic environment creates a feeling of intimacy and vulnerability reflected in Joey Bada\$\$’s verse and more acutely in the bridge. The bridge features both Tablo and Joey Bada\$\$ vocalizing different lines in a call-and-response fashion.

Joey Bada\$\$ calls out, “Good lord help me,” and Tablo responds with “It’s hard, but soon [we’ll] be happy (힘겹지만 곧 행복이 되겠지 *himgyeopjiman got haengbogi doegetji*)” and “It’s scary but soon [we’ll] be happy (두렵지만 곧 행복이 되겠지 *duryeopjiman got haengbogi doegetji*).” This call and response creates a dialectic relationship between Tablo’s framing of han as resilience and Joey Bada\$\$’s vulnerable introspection. Like the han that runs through his veins, Tablo’s voice encourages the community to push forward in anticipation of happiness, to push forward to eventually get “ahead.” But what of those souls that don’t get ahead? That, as Tablo noted in his first verse, go “insane” instead. The answer is in the interior space created by Joey Bada\$\$’s introspective nihilism. In his hook, Joey raps that “a sunny day won’t make this pic clear,” when this line is juxtaposed with the depiction of Tablo’s resilient working-class family and Joey’s triumphant ascension to “rap supreme” it makes explicit an irony at the heart of the song and the urban environment — sometimes hard work isn’t enough. As Tablo brushes past the ones who don’t get ahead, the ones left “insane,” Joey gives their pain a voice. As he does, they cry out to the “good lord.” If Tablo’s Koreanness is predicated on perpetual resilience and endurance, then Joey Bada\$\$’s Black introspection and nihilism become the condition for reprieve. In Blackness, one can finally cry out, and then, as Tablo concludes in the outro, they can finally “sit back, lie down” and find rest.

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¹ All romanizations are by the author according to the conventions of the Revised Romanization of Korean.

² Seo Taiji and the Boys were a three-man music group active between 1992 and 1996. They were heralded as introducing the first iteration of what is now known as K-pop. They utilized a combination of rap, street dance choreography, and hip hop inspired instrumentation in their performances earning them titles as commercial representations of both K-pop and K-Hip Hop.

³ All lyrical translations were provided by the author.

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