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# Book Review of, K-pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media

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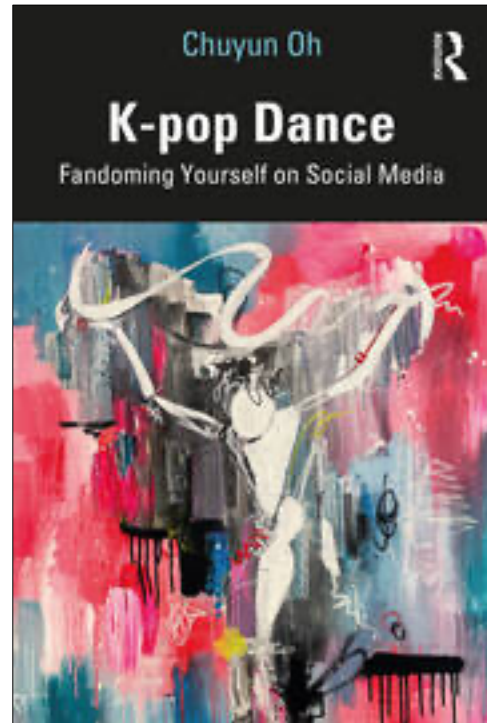
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Chuyun Oh, **K-pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022, 194 pp., \$52.95 (paperback).

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In an interview with *El País*, RM, a leader of BTS, stated,

In the West, people just don't *get it* [emphasis added]. Korea is a country that has been invaded, razed to the ground, and torn in two. Just 70 years ago, there was nothing. . . . But now, the whole world is looking at Korea. How is that possible? . . . Well, because people try so fucking hard to better themselves. You are in France or the UK, countries that have been colonizing others for centuries, and you come to me with, "Oh God, you put so much pressure on yourselves; life in Korea is so stressful!" Well, yes. That's how you get things done. And it's part of what makes K-pop so appealing, although, of course, there's a dark side. (Gosálvez, 2023, para. 15)



This interview, which grabbed the attention of K-pop fans, was RM's sharp criticism of the privileged Western world that does not properly understand K-pop, that is, one culture of the non-Western world that has taken the world by storm.

Chuyun Oh, in her first book, ***K-pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media***, is in agreement with RM's remarks. The book argues why K-pop dance, which has gained worldwide popularity through social media, should be considered an independent dance genre, standing alongside others, such as ballet, tap, or hip-hop. Furthermore, it explains how K-pop dance, dancers, fan-dancers, dance influencers, choreographers, and the industry can be understood in the context of the sociocultural and technological changes occurring around the world. In short, this book helps people "get it."

*K-Pop Dance* has a two-part structure that begins with an introduction in which the author discusses critical theoretical terms, such as *social media dance*, *identity passing*, *hybridity*, and *authenticity*. The introduction also explains the methods employed in the book, including interpretative analysis of K-pop dance videos and performances and ethnographic research.

The book's first part focuses on the nuts and bolts of K-pop dance by theorizing and formulating social media dance, as well as historicizing and contextualizing K-pop dance. The first chapter, "Social Media

Dance: TikTok Dance Challenges,” uses a case example of a Vietnamese dance influencer named Quang Đăng to illustrate what social media dance is. It unfolds the differences between traditional dance genres and social media dance in terms of spatial, temporal, and spectatorial aspects and discusses K-pop as an exemplar of “Tiktokkable” social media dance (p. 31).

Chapter 2, “The Evolution of K-pop Dance from the 1980s to the 2020s,” traces the contemporary root of K-pop dance, starting with 80’s dance troupe culture on a TV screen and ending with the 2020’s globalized and capitalized K-pop dance. The chapter explains the precursors of some characteristics of contemporary K-pop dance, such as gestural point choreography, face dance, and ending pose. It also elaborates on how players in the K-pop scene, from social media dancers to idol performers to industrial professionals, cope with changes and issues they face in a rapidly capitalized entertainment world. This chapter helps the reader learn not only the history of K-pop dance but also that of K-pop as a whole, as K-pop’s formulation and popularity heavily rely on dance performance.

“BTS: The Modern Dancers,” the third chapter, investigates the leading K-pop group’s dance movements that, per the author, demonstrate the hybridity of classical and Tiktokkable dance beyond boundaries. It analyzes choreography, the dancers’ body use, stage, breath, height variation, the stage’s mise-en-scène, and the meaning of barefoot choreography in music videos. Oh’s examination of BTS members’ anxiety and pressure insinuated in the performances stands out in this chapter. Such close reading is possible thanks to her experience as a dancer, which will be pointed out later in this review.

The second part of the book delves deeper into the personal stories and experiences of K-pop dancers, the author herself included. While the discussions of the issues of K-pop dancers’ identities appear in the first part, they are explored in depth in the second part, beginning with chapter 4, “K-pop Cover Dance as Intercultural Performance.” In this chapter, the author conducts interviews with various K-pop dancers who are college students in the San Diego area, allowing them to narrate their journey into K-pop dance and how it has impacted their lives. The author emphasizes the function of K-pop dance not only as a platform for performance but also as a social arena where diversity and inclusivity make dancers feel comfortable. Additionally, the chapter explores how identity passing varies for each dancer, depending on their race, ethnicity, class, and previous experiences.

Chapter 5, “A White K-pop Fan-Dancer in Japan,” provides detailed ethnographic accounts of one White female K-pop dancer from the United States, exploring how identity negotiation can occur during her “self-exploration” (p. 136). The author takes a cautious approach in judging the dancer’s culturally appropriative attitude when performing K-pop dance, but her critical reading of the attitude unearths the racial hierarchy within the transnational dance genre. Oh’s insight into the relationship between racial issues and K-pop dance is evident in this chapter.

The last chapter, “A Refuge for Refugee Teens,” is Oh’s self-ethnography as a diasporic and border-crossing dancer-scholar. Also, it is a performance ethnography about refugee teens in upstate New York who are financially in a different situation from most college K-pop dancers in chapter 4 and the privileged White dancer discussed in chapter 5. The author shares a heartwarming story about her dance performance, *Love Means Love*, with the refugee teens who co-choreographed the highly applauded performance with her,

mixing K-pop and *salpuri*, Korean folk dance moves. The chapter argues that K-pop dance, "an emerging hipster culture of global youth" (p. 157), can also serve as a communicative tool for refugee teens' survival in their new land.

"Epilogue: (Im)Possibility of Doing Performance Ethnography in K-pop Dance" continues the story about one of the refugee teens named Hyun and his growing pains because of his status as a less privileged K-pop dancer. Hyun's struggles make the author self-reflexive and self-critical about the im/possibility of (K-pop) dance performance as "a site of resistance" (p. 166). The beginning of this book seems abound with an optimistic vibe about the impact and role of K-pop dance in youth culture, but the ending offers a mixed picture grounded in the author's internal conflicts as a dancer-scholar who agonized over "turning a failed ethnography into an ethnography of failure" (p. 14). The epilogue demonstrates the author's and K-pop dancers' joy, hope, fear, frustration, disappointment, and trust when they dance.

The most significant merit of this book is that the author herself is a dancer and scholar crossing boundaries, much like K-pop. Oh writes, "K-pop fan dancers have transgressive potential and challenge the long-standing hierarchy between high and low, critics and artists, liveness and digitalization, West and East, authenticity and imitation" (p. 3). As a dancer-turned-academic, she exemplifies the transgressive potential of K-pop. As her self-ethnographic stories, carefully interwoven with those of K-pop dancers in this book, demonstrate, Oh has been crossing and straddling many (identity) borders. For instance, she has moved between being a ballet dancer and a K-pop dance instructor and between being a ballerina of a previously colonized space and a diasporic researcher residing in a highly developed country. *K-Pop Dance* shows how moving across borders cultivated her analytical and critical eyes to portray body movements and capture the characteristics of K-pop dance, as well as her capabilities to translate them into academic languages and texts. In this sense, this book is about not only K-pop but also Oh's life as a dancer-scholar who is transgressive between classical and contemporary, non-Western and Western, and authentic and imitative.

*K-Pop Dance* undeniably leaves a significant footprint in performance studies, expanding the discipline's scholarly perspectives on what counts as dance, what kind of dance deserves scholarly attention as a dance genre, who can dance, and where. In addition, the author's attempt to historicize, contextualize, and theorize K-pop dance lays a seminal ground for K-pop to be established as a dance genre and contributes to understanding transcultural youth culture that thrives on social media. For lay readers and undergraduate students wishing to gain a basic understanding of K-pop dance, this book will be an exciting read, with up-to-date examples and dancer-scholar self-narratives making the book readable without heavy theoretical investigations and academic jargon.

## Reference

- Gosálvez, P. (2023, March 15). RM, the leader of K-pop band BTS: "We work so hard in Korea because 70 years ago there was nothing." *El País*. Retrieved from <https://english.elpais.com/culture/2023-03-15/rm-the-leader-of-k-pop-band-bts-we-work-so-hard-in-korea-because-70-years-ago-there-was-nothing.html>