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My late mother, 김수분 (Soo Boon Kim), was born in Seoul, Korea, on October 3, 1939. She was the second daughter in a family of eight, although two of her siblings passed away before I was born. To me, as I was growing up, she and her surviving siblings were Big Uncle, Big Auntie, Middle Uncle, my mom (Middle Auntie to my cousins), Small Uncle, and Small Auntie. Small Uncle was by far the tallest, the three daughters were all the same height, and Big Uncle was the shortest. They tended to disagree about less visible things, like who was the smartest or the most gifted or the most annoying, but when they weren't disagreeing or being disagreeable, they were very interesting people. When they were born, Korea was a colony of Japan, there was no North or South Korea, and they all spoke Japanese when they first attended the public schools in their neighborhood. Their mother, my maternal grandmother, was not fluent in written or spoken Chinese and maybe not even in Korean, although her husband went to university in Japan. When my mother was eleven years old, all the schools were destroyed during the Korean War, just five years after these folks had their country back from the Imperial Japanese government.

During the war, my father's family fled south as refugees from northern Korea. After 1950, there were now two countries—North Korea and South Korea—and these brand-new nations hated each other. They hated one another's allies, including and especially the Americans, the Russians, and the Chinese. Their modern armies had destroyed everything in Korea. My father and mother thus grew up during a time when a good, stable education was not available for the vast majority of people, when many people feared the imminent outbreak of yet another devastating war, and when shortages of food and other necessities were common.

To deter a North Korean invasion, the Americans came in very large numbers, and they were clearly not like the Chinese, the Japanese, or the Russians. The Americans had a huge impact on South Korea, especially after 1950. As you can tell, I'm writing about this now in English, having completed nearly all of my own education at the public schools in California, including at the University of California. All of these things—the Japanese imperial government in Korea, the Korean War, and then the Americans in Korea—shaped by mother's life and my own life in profound ways, in ways that I did not appreciate fully until after my own formal education had ended.<sup>1</sup>

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In the mid-1950s, when Seoul still had hundreds of thousands of people dealing with crushing poverty, the Americans were the only ones who seemed to have anything. An average American soldier earned more in one month than many Korean folks earned in one year, and so the areas around these Americans became centers of economic activity. The United States Eighth Army was stationed in Yongsan—my mother’s family lived within about a fifteen-minute walk from this “rich neighborhood.” By 1953, after the armistice, the Eighth Army was such a firm presence that many officers had permission to bring their wives and children, even though it was still a war zone. There were many adult and raunchy forms of entertainment and commercial activity near the military bases, and so to provide healthy alternatives for their own children, the American moms started special programs within the bases themselves, including classes in classical ballet. My mother and my aunts were among the “local girls” who were invited to attend. (My uncles didn’t go.) My own mother did not do so well, but in 2018, in the homes of both my Big Auntie and Small Auntie, the ballet motifs were the most obvious.<sup>2</sup>

My Big Auntie did so well that the American moms gave her a scholarship so that she could study and teach choreography at the Brenau Academy in Gainesville, Georgia. Within weeks of arriving, 김수진 became Soo Jin Kim. She was among the first Korean women to attend Brenau, and in time, my Big Auntie became a pioneer of sorts. Through the family reunification preferences of the Immigration Act of 1965, my Big Auntie petitioned for the following people, starting in 1973, after she became an American citizen: Big Uncle, his wife, and their son; Big Auntie’s second husband, and then her daughter; Middle Uncle, his wife, and their daughter; Small Uncle and his first wife; Small Auntie, her husband, and their two daughters; and then my mother and her two boys.

Our Korean names were 박장우 (Park Jang Woo) and 박성우 (Park Sung Woo), but Big Auntie wanted us to have English names right away. Her daughter happened to have two friends at school, one was Edward, the other was John, and so that’s how we became Edward J.W. Park and John S.W. Park. On the same day, 김수분 became Soo Boon Kim. My parents divorced when we left Korea, and so my mother, my brother, and I were the last of my aunt’s relatives to come to Los Angeles in April 1975. We were part of a long chain migration, although in some ways, the links in the chain have kept going: by herself, my Big Auntie petitioned for at least seventeen Koreans to come to America through 1975, but just as many more Koreans are also here because her *other* relatives petitioned for more people, too, after they also passed into American citizenship. My aunt and my family felt the amplifying effects of the family reunification provisions in our own lives: it must have been hard for my Big Auntie to find Korean food in Gainesville in 1964, but because so many Korean folks chose to settle in Los Angeles near their families in the 1970s, it’s rather easy to find all things Korean there right now.<sup>3</sup>

As much as she may have missed Korean food, however, in many other ways, Big Auntie’s family, like Big Auntie herself, was already quite Americanized before coming to the

United States. Big Uncle took his college degree in Economics at Seoul National University, where the first president in the postwar period was Harry Ansted, an educator from the University of Southern California. Middle Uncle once had a Harley Davidson to ride around Seoul, a moving treasure that he bought from an American GI, and in the photos, he looks just so cool in the American aviator glasses. Big Auntie and Small Auntie were all tutus and ballet shoes growing up. My mother and her siblings were raised as Roman Catholics—their own grandparents had converted before the Japanese had taken over, and the American missionaries re-formed the churches in Seoul after the war. My mother suggested once that they went to church regularly because they had free food there, during a time when food was hard to find.

And my own mother loved American music—this music that had arrived on the airwaves with General Douglas MacArthur, through the American Forces Korea Network, and through the RCA and Philco radios that the Americans had brought with them. My mother listened for hours to Elvis Presley, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Jim Reeves, Bing Crosby, and the Fontane Sisters. She also liked the Kim Sisters, Cho Yong-pil, and Patti Kim, but Elvis, Louis, and Nat taught my mother her earliest English words and phrases, and I think that they gave her an optimistic, hopeful sense of what America was all about. “I think to myself, what a wonderful world.” Through this music, my mother was already thinking about America in her late teens and twenties, many years before she came to Los Angeles. Like Patti Kim, my mother was perhaps imagining herself as Soo Kim instead of 김수분.<sup>4</sup>

In her love for American music, my mother was not alone. It was as though the world was gripped by an American fever, and on the other side of the Eurasian continent, in Dartford, England, Keith Richards and his friend, Mick Jagger, were listening to American blues music and rock and roll, because the American military was in England as well, having arrived there during and after World War II. Richards developed a passion for Billie Holiday, Elvis Presley, and Chuck Berry. Richards taught himself how to play the guitar, and his early collaborations with Jagger involved hours and hours of listening, first to the American radio shows, and then to a prized collection of records acquired from American GIs. As in Korea, many of the local women in Dartford and in the surrounding areas were marrying American GIs and leaving for America in the 1950s. America was also their promised land. Richards and Jagger formed the Rolling Stones, and they thus became part of that “British Invasion” that included the Beatles, The Kinks, The Dave Clark Five, and Dusty Springfield, all of them also heavily influenced by African American blues and jazz music. In 1964, the Rolling Stones came to the promised land to tour in style.

Richards and Jagger recalled later that America was not as fabulous or as wonderful as they’d expected. Real-life African Americans were rather poor, and they lived in rather harsh neighborhoods in the major American cities. My mother came to America in 1975, and she pretty much came to the same conclusion: America wasn’t so great if you weren’t white, if you were, say, a Korean immigrant struggling with two kids. Richards went back to England, my mother stayed in Los Angeles. Other than their passion for American music, I don’t think that my mother and Mr. Richards had a whole lot in common, but it’s pleasing for me to see how

these migrations to America could be similar for so many different kinds of people in the years before and after the Immigration Act of 1965. Many Americans may not have been aware of this at the time, but their music and culture—traveling with the soldiers that they’d sent abroad—was having already a profound impact on the shape of America, both in terms of the immigrants, and in terms of American popular culture itself.<sup>5</sup>

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In 1975, after my mother settled into America with her two sons, Edward and John, she bought a turntable that played LPs—this was back in the day, before iPods and iPhones, before the internet and streaming. Back in the day, we had turntables, eight-track cassettes, and tape decks, and the LP, the “long play” record, which was the preferred form for recorded music. I once showed my daughters my LP collection, and of course, they had no idea what these things were. (If you have no idea what I’m talking about, please look these up online.) They were nevertheless amazing, they revolutionized how people experienced and shared music for several decades, especially when they were paired with recording tape decks, and they often occupied a prized place in the living rooms and dens of many Americans and immigrants alike. For herself, my mom bought Elvis Presley and Jim Reeves LPs, and those records became part of my early childhood: “I’m caught in a trap, I can’t walk out, because I love you too much, baby.”

In time, as we were becoming Americans, Ed and I bought records, too. I had a pre-teen hard rock phase, Ed was partial to ska, reggae, and punk. The public libraries in LA and Orange County had extensive LP collections, plus record players and headphones, and so we went to listen as much as to borrow. Ed’s own modest but growing record collection showed how the British invasion lasted and changed well into the 1980s: The Police, The English Beat, Squeeze, The Sex Pistols. My mom really didn’t care for the Sex Pistols. She didn’t much care for most of what I’d liked either, and this was why she bought us a nice pair of headphones for the home around 1982. I still think, though, that the Sex Pistols are best without headphones and with good speakers, in a room full of other people who also appreciate the Sex Pistols. “God save the Queen.”

In a home with two Korean American kids and a middle-aged Korean American mom, a common playlist can be difficult. Our preference for music seemed entirely subjective, and our tastes tended to diverge, more so over time. I also think that American popular culture was much more powerful than we had realized: after consuming hours of American television, movies, and music, Ed and I were removed from Korean popular culture. In fact, we had no idea what Koreans might like in Korea, and I must confess, I wasn’t always happy being Korean in towns full of white folks, many of whom didn’t care for Koreans and would let us know it. When Korean immigrants moved to places like Orange County, as we did in the late 1970s, rather normal looking white folks would refer to us as gooks, chinks, and nips, and never in affectionate ways. It seemed that on every block, there was at least one very vocal white

supremacist family in Orange County in the early 1980s. We knew this because we walked by their houses every day.

The sociologists call it “internalized racism,” when the object of racial hostility comes to dislike the very identity that triggered the hostility. Anti-Semites often cause Jewish people to dislike being Jewish, for example, and white supremacists can make African Americans not want to associate with other African Americans, and even to look down upon other African Americans just as viciously as any white supremacist. It was very hard for me to enjoy being Korean; I think it was the same for many other Korean Americans of my generation, growing up all over America. It didn’t help, I think, that the only Asians we saw on television were weird and subservient people, like Hop Sing on *Bonanza*, a popular Western television show that we watched when we were growing up. In time, all of the music and popular culture that I myself preferred had no hint of Korean in it. Was I becoming a self-hating Korean, growing up in a white supremacist Orange County? I think so. It’s a phase many immigrants (still) go through, and some never quite grow out of it. But I think that this form of self-loathing was why I expressed such vocal displeasure when my mother sometimes played her Korean records at home. I wish I hadn’t done that.

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Maybe my mother knew that we were becoming Americans, and maybe not always in good ways. On Sundays, though, when we were all home and in a listening mood, we tried harder to play things for each other that we all might like. Later, when the three of us were living in Emeryville, Oakland, and Berkeley, sharing music became a distinct pleasure, like going to the movies together or trying different restaurants. We were pleased to discover that there were many kinds of music that we could share, including Bob Marley, U2, Los Lobos, and The Beatles, to name just a few. The Beatles must be in the middle of many family’s musical Venn Diagram: no matter what your age or the other musical tastes in your family, most everyone likes something by The Beatles. They were an obvious overlap, but my mother was surprised by how much she liked U2 or Los Lobos, one band from Ireland, the other from East LA. In the 1980s, U2 seemed to be discovering America like we had discovered America. Ed also brought Bob Marley into our lives, and this was how my mother learned to love reggae. Indeed, once we moved to the Bay Area, where overt forms of racial hostility were less common and where the environment just felt more open to people of every variety, my family became much more cosmopolitan. My family was also becoming a pack of leftists. The music and lyrics had an impact on all of us: “Get up, stand up—stand up for your rights.”

We discovered music together: Los Lobos was an amazing band in the mid 1980s, and David Hidalgo, Conrad Lozano, and Louis Perez were Mexican Americans, Cesar Rosas was a Mexican immigrant, and they met one another as teens at Garfield High School, one of the centers of Mexican American life in East Los Angeles. We first heard them on the radio: around late 1984, we were driving across the Bay Bridge toward San Francisco, and this song came on,

“A Matter of Time,” on KFOG. My mom, Ed, and I loved it immediately. I’ve written elsewhere of why I’ve continued to love this song so much, but I’ve mentioned it again here because this one resonates so deeply with immigration themes, with the discussions about leaving and reuniting with your family after migrating away. The song contains the aspirations of all immigrants, especially the ones of modest means, like my own family around 1984, when we were together in the Bay Area, when my brother was in college and when we moved up to be with him. “I hope it’s all it seems, not another empty dream.”

In their own immigrant and Mexican American families, the members of Los Lobos must have felt as we felt, and they must have experienced similar things to what we’d experienced. Many of their members were here because the Americans had come to their country first, to engage in regime change, to recruit braceros, and to intervene in their own political and civil wars, albeit earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mexico was part of an American sphere for at least fifty years longer than South Korea—after 1910, American leaders were concerned that peasant revolts in Mexico could spiral into a communist government, and because this would pose an existential threat to the United States, American policy makers used their awesome military and economic power to prevent such a thing from happening.

The Americans shaped a lot of the politics in Mexico, and in that way, the members of Los Lobos were thus, like the Park family, post-colonial immigrants from a client state, in the fancier language of political science experts. David Hidalgo and Louis Perez found each other in Los Angeles because their families had come to America one or two generations before, using networks that the Americans had helped to create.<sup>6</sup> After 1965, the Americans would intervene in more Central American and Latin American countries, American officials would participate in more toxic civil wars, and then the Americans would receive even more migrants to the United States than ever from that region. This process, too, has proved to be an on-going one.

In the 1980s, these migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were fleeing for their lives, and they were often leaving their loved ones behind. Those who left, those who were left behind—neither was sure of their fate, causing great worry and hardship for everyone. Hidalgo and Perez were writing their songs in English, inflected with Tex-Mex, cumbia, and nortena flavors, and these songs were three and four-minute masterpieces. Until their music, I had no idea that popular songs could speak so directly to people like us, people like my family. I remember translating their lyrics for my mom, who was always so sad that she never got to see her own mother again after coming to California. Like many thousands of Americans, my family and I discovered Los Lobos on the radio, but hundreds of thousands of Mexican and Central American and Korean immigrants, and modest immigrants of every variety, might find familiar the themes in their music and lyrics, just as we did in 1984.

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In the 1990s, as we all got to hip hop and rap, my mother mostly stayed in another room while her boys got on our Public Enemy, Ice T, and De La Soul. In Berkeley, throughout high

school, hip hop exploded, but we never translated 2 Live Crew for my mother. I'm not quite sure whether I myself really liked every form of rap or hip-hop, but rap and hip-hop were unavoidable if you were growing up in the Bay Area in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Much of it was catchy, infectious, and very memorable: "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, tell me mirror, what is wrong? Could it be my De La Soul, or is it just my De La Soul?" It wasn't just me, myself, and I who loved this music.

Music historians disagree about the origins of this particular art form, but no one can miss how so many of the early rap and hip-hop artists were from New York, from communities of Jamaican and Caribbean immigrants in the Bronx. Rap and hip-hop became international, but it began very local, within immigrant communities, these places where people from elsewhere had different ideas about speaking and talking over a beat. Lance Taylor, Lawrence Parker, Trevor Smith, Trevor Taheim, Sandra Denton, Clive Campbell, William Adams, and Christopher Wallace all had parents and ancestors from Jamaica, or they themselves were born in Jamaica. Many dozens of people who became famous through rap and hip-hop were not immigrants, of course, but that there were so many immigrants and children of immigrants among the leading artists was both obvious and amazing. Rap and hip-hop represented a major shift in American popular music, and everyone around the world felt it. Afro Caribbean immigrants played a huge role in that development.<sup>7</sup>

In 1986, my mother returned from a trip to Seoul for the first time in over a decade, and she saw rap and hip-hop in her homeland. This seemed a part of how Korea was still embracing American things. There were many more people in cars, and the modern highways now looked like the ones in Los Angeles, complete with fatal accidents and traffic jams. Shopping centers and modern grocery stores had replaced many of the funkier open-air markets of Seoul, and young professionals and the people born after the Korean War looked and dressed differently than when my mother was a girl, because so many people were wearing American-style dresses and suits and working inside American-style office buildings. American music, American people, American movies, American fashions—they were everywhere in Seoul. My mother saw Korean kids break-dancing to Bronx-based beats near the streets of Myeong-dong, one of the oldest and busiest commercial districts, and the coolest young Koreans were getting into hip-hop in a big way. To my mother, Korea was more like America, for better and for worse, and to many of her friends, my mother herself seemed, well, American now.

My mother became an American citizen in 1992, and then, after a long bout of illness, she passed away in 1999, before her four grand-daughters were born. My mother saw her grandson for just one year, but my niece was born a few months after she had passed, and then my eldest daughter came in 2000, my twins in 2001. I'm still very sorry that they never got to meet my mother, to hear her stories or to listen to her varied playlists. Her health had been very poor for many years; divorce, single motherhood, a difficult working life—they all had taken a toll. Through my professional work, I've learned that many women in Korea, under similar circumstances, had to give up their children to try to make a life for themselves, and now that I'm older, with a life such as mine, I can not help but feel thankful for my mother, that my

mother just couldn't or didn't give up her boys. In my heart, in her heart, there was no judgment against anyone who made other choices—in light of her sacrifices for us, however, it was obvious to me and to my brother that we should dedicate our first scholarly books to her. Her passing left a giant, gaping void.

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And yet my late mother would smile, I think, to see her grand-daughters now, to hear what they like in music and song. In 2017, when my children were in their teens, they covered their bedroom walls with large posters of young Korean men in various poses of cool. BTS was part of “hallyu,” the Korean wave, and like many other Korean bands, they arrived in my home through YouTube videos, through which these seven young men became international superstars. My girls have played a few songs for me, and I can hear why it's fun for them, but I'm middle-aged now, and BTS doesn't do it for me. I've bought my girls some very nice Bluetooth headphones. My girls continue to be captivated with their singing and dancing, and I think that my late mother would be pleased and amused that my American-born children are so Korean in their preferences. In their spare time, they also watch Korean dramas with their own mom, they like anime movies from Japan, and they all enjoy a good burrito as they're singing and watching.<sup>8</sup>

BTS is a Korean musical group supported by a Korean entertainment company, and the members of BTS sing and rap in Korean, but they're not quite Korean in the way that my ancestors were Korean, at least not culturally. I'm pretty sure that my mother would say that they're sort of Korean. They're quite polyglot in their art and music: I think that my late Big Auntie would agree that their dancing and choreography are like ballet, or at least a modern version of ballet forms. They move in amazing ways—it's very transfixing. BTS songs are mostly in Korean, plus a little English, but they rap and hip-hop, too, and their music is thus Afro Caribbean Bronx American in form and delivery. They owe a great deal to the Jackson Five and the Wu-Tang Clan, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five; some of their songs have clear gospel and jazz inflections as well, in addition to generous doses of Korean folk music. My mom would have liked their catchy version of “Arirang.” In their lyrics, they confront the edgier themes facing adolescents—the dangers of low self-esteem and neglect, and then the difficulties of self-love, the perils of narcissism and materialism, and a pervasive sense that life is unfair and unjust. Within BTS songs, friendships are hard to maintain amid the pressures of life. For these problems, however, they recommend embracing themselves, their families, and one another—they never publicly fantasize about guns or revenge or drugs. Instead, BTS would prefer to give everyone a big hug, plus encouragement for all of us to develop big doses of empathy and kindness.

This might be why so many Asians, Europeans, Mexicans, Latin Americans, and people in the Middle East love them so. They're so wholesome in their themes, never saying anything bad about mom or dad, and always ending their concerts with expressions of love and gratitude

for their families and fans. They're like the Rolling Stones, like Jagger and Richards, but happier, and perhaps less dependent on alcoholic beverages and controlled substances to get through their day, even when they too can't get no satisfaction. In America, in their public appearances with Jimmy Kimmel or Ellen DeGeneres, the members of BTS present as very polite, very model minority, albeit with dark, gothy clothes and colored hair.

Middle-aged me finds this all surreal: if, in 1975, someone told my mother that a Korean pop group would become so successful around the world, including in my own home, she would not have believed it. I myself have trouble believing it, but BTS is the bomb, my girls love them, and my wife and I have already spent a tiny fortune on BTS merchandise and concert tickets. Our children make us feel better by telling us that BTS donates both quietly and publicly to a wide range of worthy causes, which makes the kids love them even more. They are rapping and dancing with fortunes to spare, borrowing and adding from multiple artistic traditions to do their thing, and in my house, it's like coming full circle. My mother had this crush on Elvis, because he sang and danced just so, but now her grand-daughters have a similar crush for these Korean guys, such that I have to see Jin, Jimin, and Jung-kook every day. I feel like I know Rap Monster, because my girls make me watch new videos, and their enthusiasm for all things BTS reminds me of a time when I also felt that music was everything. For my kids, having a "bias" is not a bad thing; for me, watching all of this unfold, life is a trip. My girls love Korean popular music, Korean food, Korean dramas, and Korean cosmetics—their Korean is in some ways better than mine, so exposed they've been to things Korean. My eldest daughter was the President of the K-Pop Club at her high school, and for her and her friends, Korean is synonymous with the hip and the cool.

My late mother would find all of it incredible and interesting, and being a cosmopolitan person herself, she would be pleased to see how the Immigration Act of 1965 had in fact changed America in revolutionary, unexpected ways. It helped to bring the familiar closer to her many descendants; it has made Korea familiar to many Americans. When the President of the K-Pop Club invited some of her friends to our house, they were watching BTS on the big TV, my kids plus assorted other Americans, none of them obviously Korean, and they were swaying and dancing and into it, commenting at length about the "beautiful guys" and "the way they move." "I wish I could go to Korea," one girl said, "They're such beautiful people." When I heard her say this, I wondered if my mother said and felt as she did, albeit in the opposite direction, about fifty years ago on the other side of the world.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> I think that the best single volume for Korean history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is this one: Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting ethnographic study of American military bases in Korea and local reactions to them, see Elisabeth Schober, *Base Encounters* (2016).

<sup>3</sup> This form of chain migration, often centered around women, is quite common in the period after 1965. See, for example, Cecilia Menjivar et al., *Immigrant Families* (2016), and *Gender and U.S. Immigration* (Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, ed., 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, my mother and her sisters all became variations of Soo Kim in America, which was kind of funny when they were together and introducing themselves to an American: “Hi, I’m Soo, and this is my sister Soo, and this is my other sister Soo.”

<sup>5</sup> For a first-hand account of the Rolling Stones, one that foregrounds their experiences with American blues music, see Keith Richards and James Fox, *Life* (2011).

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting history of Mexican American popular music in Southern California in the postwar period, see David Reyes and Tom Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances* (2009). For an interesting history of Los Lobos, see Chris Morris, *Los Lobos* (2015).

<sup>7</sup> For histories of rap and hip-hop, I’ve relied on: Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (1994); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* (2005); and Jeffrey Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution* (2007).

<sup>8</sup> For histories of “hallyu,” the wave of Korean popular culture around the world, I relied on: *The Korean Wave* (Youna Kim, ed., 2013); *The Korean Wave* (Yasue Kuwahara, ed., 2014); *The Global Impact of South Korean Popular Culture* (Valentina Marinescu, ed., 2014); John Lie, *K-Pop* (2014); and *Hallyu 2.0* (Sangjoon Lee and Abe Mark Nornes, eds., 2015). I enjoyed also Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* (2014), which more than the others helped me to understand my own kids, as well as the business and government collaborations that led to hallyu.