AfroAsian Imaginations: Autoethnographies of Black Panther in Korea

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Abstract

What would it look like for AfroAsian Futures to exist not just as bodies of land and water, but for bodies of people? In this article, an African American male graduate student and a mixed Korean-American female graduate student, use autoethnography to explore their relationships with the movie Black Panther, and develop our concept of AfroAsian Futures. Parts of the movie Black Panther were filmed in Busan, Korea, making us keenly interested in grappling with exploring AfroAsian Imaginations by using Critical Collaborative Autoethnography as a methodology. We make the connection between AfroAsian relationships around resistance, and consider Afrofuturism as an autoethnographic embodiment. We invite the readers to engage with our thought process, and imagine a world where connections and tensions exist between African and Asian communities.

Keywords: Afroasian Imaginations, Critical Collaborative Autoethnography, Wakanda, Korea, Afroasian Futures, Afrofuturism.

Introduction

Since the movie *Black Panther* hit theatres worldwide in February 2018, nothing has quite shaped Johnnie's and Hannah's lives and conversations like trying to reimagine the fictional Marvel country Wakanda as a place that could become a reality. Black Panther is a superhero character featured in Marvel comic books where Prince T'Challa (who becomes King) rules Wakanda, a country functioning on a valuable element vibranium and hidden away from the rest of the Marvel universe. We bridge the personal, political and fictional through our theory of AfroAsian Futurism. For this paper, we will begin by introducing ourselves since our identities heavily influence our motivation to imagine our AfroAsian Futures.

First, we (Hannah and Johnnie) introduce our individual positionalities, or personal introductions. Secondly, we move into a brief discussion of Afrofuturism as a theoretical framework that allows us to build off of Anzaldúa's (1999), Borderlands ideas and Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari's (2017) notions of woke work. Next, we move into a conversation about the importance of autoethnography and how it relates to our ideas of AfroAsian Imaginations. We continue by grappling with the way *Black Panther* intervened in our imaginations about African and Asian futures.

Who Are We?

Hannah's Stohry

I (Hannah speaking) racially identify as Asian and white, and ethnically Korean-American. The ways in which I was socialized and racialised, as well as my experiences as a Third Culture Kid (TCK), spending my developmental years in cultures that differed from my family's dominant culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2017), and growing up in multicultural Christian Air Force military culture led to me becoming a social worker. Watching *Black Panther* at least four times, I saw the intentional efforts to bridge the AfroAsian gap and bring Wakanda to Korea. In many ways, the movie humanizes yet acts as an anthem for POC and WOC, and alludes to the liberatory efforts of the Asian and African diasporas. It heavily influences my experiences and journey of "woke-ness," contributing to the development of who I am, which is someone who is evolving.

Johnnie's Story

I (Johnnie speaking) am mixed class, mixed religion, heterosexual Black man who believes in the abolition of prisons. I came to political expression by ways of having both of my parents incarcerated for five years or more. I identified with N'Jadaka during the museum scene as he poisons the White female curator in order to steal back Wakandan artifacts. He reminded me of historical Black radical male subjects Nat Turner, Huey P. Newton, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X who spoke deeply about resistance to oppression, and also were responsible for direct actions that led to Black freedom/liberation struggles. I could feel their power in him. Having the movie *Black Panther* set in Korea, Oakland, and Wakanda made me think of the bridge between African and Asian solidarities.

Theoretical Framework

Through individual and collaborative inventory (Anzaldúa, 1999), contemplative practices, personally de-humanizing experiences, and intersectionalities, we use our storied experiences to influence our lives' directions. We often walk the borders and wander the borderlands of our existence in a racially divided society. Anzaldúa (1999) explains that "a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (p.25). As we raise consciousness and wade through muddy waters (especially those of us with complex intersectional identities, using Killmonger and T'Challa as examples) (Stohry, 2019), educate ourselves, question, theorize, and Imagine, we evolve in relationship with and weave in and amongst those unexplored and uncharted territories, with Imagined Futures potentials.

This exploration through reflection has allowed us to understand walking the lines and wandering the borderlands of white power, privilege and denial and continuing to develop and raise consciousness and wokeness, in communities, much like the concept of " 우리 " (woori, meaning us/we in Korean) that signifies togetherness, through long past histories, the present, and the Future.

Afrofuturism

According to Mark Dery (1994), Afrofuturism "treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture--and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (location 516, Neal, 2013). Since African Americans have been in America, we have reimagined a more just and equitable democracy, and we argue that this has laid the groundwork for American democracy, universal human rights, and Afrofuturism. In his essay "Afrofuturism 2.0 & The Black Speculative Art Movement: Notes on a Manifesto," Anderson (2016) both documents and creates a genealogy of Afrofuturism among mystics, creative intellectuals, and artists. He suggests not only that artists such as Sun Ra and Fela Kuti sow seeds for future Afrofuturist contributions but they also anticipate in the future of radical work.

The relationship between Anderson's (2016) genealogy of Afrofuturism and Bell's (1982) "Space Trader" (a science fiction novel) helped us as autoethnographers of color think about how *Black Panther* envisions a future where Black people and People of Color are in the struggle for our human rights. Additionally, as autoethnographers of color, we combine Afrofuturism and critical collaborative autoethnography to develop our methodology.

What Is Autoethnography?

This study utilizes a critical, collaborative autoethnographic approach. In brief, autoethnographic inquiry is an ethnographic approach utilizing the lived experiences of the ethnographer (Johnson, 2014; Chang, 2008; Quinney, 1996). Autoethnography as a methodological approach finds its origins in anthropology, (Chang, 2008; Reed Danahay, 1997) which allows the ethnographic "I" to be situated in the sociocultural context. Autoethnography allows researchers to gaze inward, researching themselves, then gaze outward, attempting to find a connection with others. Together, both collaborative autoethnography and critical autoethnography form what we have called critical collaborative autoethnography as our work seeks to not only challenge hegemonic structures in community with each other (Bhattacharya, Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2008), but examine self as the subject, and as a part of the process.

Methodology

We chose critical collaborative autoethnography as our methodology, as inspired by autoethnographic methodology and publications by Ashlee et al. (2017) which model Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez's (2013) methodologies. Their methodology consisted of utilizing a shared journaling question prompt. We relied on a question we used in our original abstract: "What would it look like for AfroAsian Futures to exist not just as bodies of land and water, but for bodies of people?" We relied on this same question that we co-created to guide our separate prompt responses. Throughout the writing process (separate and collaborative), both authors communicated and shared ideas which critically analyzed, transformed, and honed our imaginations, many times over the course of several months.

Johnnie and Hannah relied on various resources (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013) including: suggested readings by mentors, co-suggested (un)intentional journal articles, *Black Panther* movie, *Avengers* movie, Youtube videos (about *Black Panther*, characters, and related Wakanda resources), magazine articles, blogs, and through theorization and analysis, re-created old/new concepts which appear in our prompt responses. After we share our collaborative pieces, we provide a brief analysis, followed by our AfroAsian Imaginations.

The Future of AfroAsian Bodies

Both of us responded to the following question: What would it look like for AfroAsian Futures to exist not just as bodies of land and water, but for bodies of people?

Johnnie's Response

Intimacy and Imagination and Intellectualism are some of the Blackest things ever, in my opinion. Intimacy is a deep journey with the intention of being in mutual relationship with another person or place or idea. Many times we think of the sexual, which is okay, but here I am thinking of the social, economical, spiritual, and political. Imagination for me is the place of liberation and decolonization. I often imagine a world without anti-Black racisms and their institutions. Intellectualism has a sacred feeling in my body when I come to think of what it means to live the life of the mind. The conversation between bell hooks and Cornel West (1991) in their fabulous text *Breaking Bread*, comes to mind. In their text, hooks and West (1991) talk about the future of the Black intellectual, and tell us that it may be one that both protects the earth and reimagines a better world. In this case, this is what AfroAsian Futures mean to both Hannah and I (I am speaking for Hannah here). Also this is what *Black Panther* meant to me as a Black person. *Black Panther* asks us as Black people to love and respect each other with new eyes.

To me, there is a bridge that one can walk on that connects Intimacy, Imagination, and Intellectualism. Black feminist writer Audre Lorde (1984) writes about the bridge that connects eroticism and intellectualism in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic of Power." Black feminists and many feminists of Color imagined futures that were Black and female and equitable. Turning to *Black Panther*, it is important for us to think of how King T'Challah lives in a fictional African nation that has a deep Black feminist leadership ensemble from Queen Mother, to Princess Shuri to the Dora Milaje (Wakandan women warriors). Black female leads, and specifically strong Black female leads are both radical and futuristic. Octavia Butler, Black science fiction writer, who has experienced a current resurgence is known also for strong Black female leads who are telepathic, who are radical, and who foresee futures no one else can. So, to our question about what would it look like to see or experience or exist in AfroAsian Futures, I would argue characters who are mindful/telepathic, characters who reject oppressive racisms, sexisms, homo and trans phobias, and all types of hierarchy and domination are the way of African and Asian Futures. Audre Lorde (1984), in her poem entitled "Litany for Survival," tells us as People of Color, particularly Black women, that we were never meant to survive. So, and going forth, what does it mean to create community worth surviving? In the afterlife of racisms, particularly anti-Black and anti-Asian racisms, what does Wakanda look like?

In the lecture "You Would've Loved It," Black futurist and lawyer Rasheedah Phillips (2017) does a genealogy of Black historical figures who broadcasted radical hopes for the future including the formerly enslaved African, orator, and abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association Movement Marcus Garvey. Philips (2017) asks the profound question "What time is freedom?" I would argue freedom begins when Black folx work against our chains together throughout the diaspora. I would argue that freedom begins when we reach back to Middle Passage moments and slave moments to ask where was Wakanda in us then? During those times of exile, persecution, and genocide as Black and African people we lost much of our languages, our family histories, and our direction.

Hannah's Response

As a social worker, I believe in the necessity of activism in order to create social change, and it is helpful to look at issues and solutions on systems levels, as systems interlock and overlap. I am increasingly burdened for our need to challenge ourselves to raise consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1999)

by asking critical questions, listening to others, and to structure our projects with intention. Our life experiences being racialized and socialized has led us (Johnnie and I) to cultivate our imagination of what our futures hold.

The future is the next now. From a perspective of someone who looks at "now" as that moment in between the inhale and exhale, each moment is now and the next moment (now) is the future. When we are practicing mindfulness, we explore what is in the here and now and practice non-judgment on phenomena and stimuli (Gunaratana, 2011). Can we challenge ourselves to take time to imagine our futures, and to hold space in the "now" to help us understand ourselves and actualize what actions we wish to take in order to realize those futures (values alignment)? Our communities' long histories of diaspora and inter-community conflict burdens my heart to draw us so close that we cannot separate the words Afro- and Asian, with the purpose of dismantling white supremacy. So, considering an AfroAsian Future which is happening now and has so much potential, we examine it and determine what we want for our communities for the next moment, and the next moment, moment by moment. This AfroAsian Future is achievable through an AfroAsian Imagination and needs continued skilled cultivated contemplation and awareness, achieved through intentional practice.

Through *Black Panther*, I was able to stretch my perception of Wakanda, and imagine utopian possibilities where there is no discrimination, inequalities or inequities, but celebration of difference. Wakanda allowed me to imagine an AfroAsian Future, one where I am reunited with my Asian ancestors. This AfroAsian Future would unite long-lost African family and Asian ancestors to fight neo-colonialism, and current oppressive systems.

I assert this important word: INTENTION. Living life with intentionality provides purpose and meaning with our actions. This Imagination for a Future is an intention that Johnnie and myself are practicing. Our imaginations are intentional, purposeful, strategic, both individual and collaborative, full of Wakanda moments Johnnie mentioned.

At the micro-level systems level, our personal relationships with our colleagues and families matter. For me, as a mixed Asian and white person, I will imagine that my individual efforts to educate people in my life as making the links from the Afro to my Asia. If we can imagine an AfroAsian Future, do we factor casualties (e.g. geographical, human?), especially in our interpersonal relationships, into the formula of a new world and reality? Despite anti-blackness being so normalized, our AfroAsian Futures can be an actualized imagination.

How can we extend this to include our communities, schools, neighborhoods and organizations? I imagine our institutions ethically cultivating equity, and that academics like ourselves are acting on our responsibility to educate people to critically think. Macro level change means examining entire systems and challenging injustices. For an AfroAsian Future, we are seeing equity at the policy levels, in that our communities are represented in the decision-making process, and the ability to hold people accountable as involved citizens. Electing officials that look like me who can be a competent representative to bring Africa and Asia together is tantamount to contributing to policies that reduce marginalization of our families and communities.

On a global level, can we also imagine a world in which technology (aiming for Wakanda-great) can bring us together somehow? I am imagining ethical technology that takes care of our earth (and universe...and all other universes) and humanity. My version of dreaming big on a global scale means that people of all shapes, sizes, colors, (insert intersectionality) can live life without fear of discrimination. In this world, we co-exist, not just as people, but in our relationships with our earth, and our earth's living beings. Maybe my big idea is to plant seeds to foster deeper connection and relationships, to heal the larger-scale impact of anti-blackness and acceptance of non-whiteness.

For me, personally, I know that my future holds and includes working to create just relationships on all systems-levels. I will continue to fight for racial justice in efforts to reduce discrimination, and to plant seeds. From a practical standpoint, our futures exist and start within, asking ourselves, what

does an AfroAsian Future look for myself and my communities, at each system level? Then, we can ask ourselves how we can expand this future and "expanding our circle of mindful community and our engagement with projects aimed at ameliorating structural and system suffering" (Magee, 2016, p. 436). I would side with Inayatullah (2008) when they argue for the recovery of people's agencies; we have to believe people are worthy of equality. We really need to believe that people are capable of change. Can we imagine a world where we all have the same privilege of being able to imagine or choose our own futures in collaboration on all the systems levels? "Yes, we can."

Analysis

Our [Hannah and Johnnie speaking] collective imaginations matured with each act of personal yet collaborative imagination, thus re-shaping our futures, with each moment. The act of "transforming" (Chang, 2008, p.126) our data (selves) is essential for autoethnographic work; our histories and positionalities are set in certain contexts, we argue that our intentional overlap of contexts is transformation of ourselves in relationship with our separate yet collaborative contexts. Our collaborative analysis of selves in relation to the joint imagination sessions, through conversation, led to our prompt responses.

(Both of us speaking) Using the example of our current global economies, Sardar (2010) illuminates how we used to be able to anticipate how we respond to stimulus in our environments, and how we can no longer anticipate our financial futures. Our postnormal realities are chaotic, complex and contradictory and our worlds make much less sense now. When we introduce new information to our brains, the ways in which we categorize the world help us interpret new information and when something does not make sense, we struggle. Despite uncertainties, we do need to negotiate new norms of virtue and ethics (Sardar, 2010); we do need to create new worlds in which people of AfroAsian origins are partners and strengthened, where our communities are contributing to mutual successes.

We recognize that there are many realities, universes, diasporas, and many Africas (Gatune & Najam, 2011); we acknowledge that there are many Asias. We acknowledge that there are many imaginations; there are infinite AfroAsian Imaginations. Life is full of successes and failures, meaning that our futures ebb and flow (Inayatullah, 2008). Gatune & Najam (2011) suggest that a driver of Africa's future includes knowledge and education, so we suggest that an AfroAsian Future could require education. So, how do we influence cultivation of knowledge and education on all systems levels, from multiple perspectives? Can we invest in education for our futures? We believe that this kind of investment also means security and long-term stability and actualization of our imaginations. Can we also invest in technology to move us forward? How do we create buy-in for investment in our futures? What would be our vibranium, or resource, on which to build our AfroAsian Future? Would it be the spiritual energies of AfroAsians, much like what Johnnie and Hannah would use to build their micro-cosmic AfroAsian Future? We contribute and exchange energies, so how do we re-create this and patent it and encourage others to hold space?

If we consider physical manifestation of AfroAsian Imaginations, can we encourage people to consider recognizing mixed race peoples as whole humans (Hannah's beef)? While we believe that race is a social construction, we can draw from Anzaldúa (1999) and consider the beautiful complexity of what it means to live on and push the borders of those constructions. Can we draw inspiration from her to raise consciousness as well as create our own equitable borders and re-define our realities and make our imaginations realities and take back what was ours and what could be?

Sardar (2010) explains how we went from normal to postnormal times, times in which complexity, chaos, and contradictions are "the forces that shape and propel postnormal times" (p. 2). They also mention that our world is becoming more interdependent and interconnected; there is an American stereotype that we are independent and perhaps more interested in self-sufficiency,

much more so than collective societies. Much like the Wakandans did in the movie, *Black Panther* sheds more light on how we as Americans are being faced with more inner conflict and expressing more resistance to building a collective that is futuristic, understanding, caring, and kinetic. Can we build capacity and invest in quality (Gatune, 2010)? Can we shift perspectives (Gatune, 2011) of AfroAsian-ness? Where is the hope? Where is the imagination?

Conclusions

In the afterlife of *Black Panther*, our lives are not the same. The question from the original call for papers asked us "When is Wakanda?" and similarly Rasheedah Phillips (2017), noted lawyer, community organizer, and Afrofuturist asks the question "What time is freedom?" Taken together, both of these questions ask People of Color, African and Asian, in this instance, to think alongside each other about the possibilities, the imaginations, the solidarities, the timings of freedom for decolonization, of mind, body, and spirit.

Counterfutures, our AfroAsian Futures, are decolonizing projects about breathing, about space to self and collective determination, and about discovering our vibranium, or powerful element of protection and potential. Our counterfutures, full of theorizing and imaginations are actions that challenge the apartheid of knowledge that is referenced by Bernal & Villalpando (2002) when talking about the discrimination faced by People of Color in the academy.

AfroAsian Futures and AfroAsian Imaginations resist. Our Futures and Imaginations resist definition and conformity and what we are doing now in this piece and our interpersonal lives is resisting convention. Those that write comics (especially Afrofuturists) and people who make the movies want to keep creating stories that deny boundaries, because there is a need and demand for it. We all imagine, express and demand it. Merely fighting against the dominant narratives is oppositional and may not leave room for progress, it is a dependent position. Shifting one's body or perspective allows for alternatives; one, perhaps, is working together, in parallel lines, moving forward, perhaps in muddy waters. These shifts awaken us (woke work) to new possibilities for our AfroAsian Futures. The future is now. The future is forever. Wakanda is now, ours, and forever. Wakanda forever.

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