



How Afrofuturism Can Heal Divides Between Black and Asian Communities

By Rohan Zhou-Lee

Gorgeous vintage women stand in black and white. Each has a face part Afro, part African. Other women, in vibrant colors, stand in kimonos wearing locs and afros. These are **Rujunko Pugh's** *Transference* and **Iona Rozeal Brown's** *...you opened my eyes man, thought i had a man, but how could i eye scan...*, respectively. Both series, while widely interpreted as Afrofuturism, take Japanese influence. For Pugh, who is of the Afro Asian Diaspora, it is to explore her African American and Japanese heritage. Pugh works across various media including printmaking, installation, paste-ups (street art) and murals, her art draws on Japanese, African and African-American found imagery. Pugh explore themes such as identity, history, culture and race as well as global movements of people, ideas and technologies.

Brown, a Black woman mentored by the late Filipino American artist **Carlos Villa**, was introduced to Japanese performance art at a young age and as an adult lived in Japan. Her work was described in the New York Times as *fantastical merging Japanese ukiyo-e prints and hip-hop; voguing and Noh and Kabuki theater; West African adinkra symbols and graffiti; Byzantine religious painting and comic-book motifs*. Such art has deep significance in a time of turbulent Black-Asian relations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian violence was pinned on Black people. Yet according to the Virulent Hate Project, in 2020 89.6% of anti-Asian racism incidents where the race was confirmed were enacted by white people. As Asians were scapegoated for the



pandemic, Black people have been scapegoated for white criminality. This does not, unfortunately, negate the anti-Asian sentiment within Black communities and vice versa.

“It can be very tricky to navigate through two worlds that I think have more in common than not,” says Brown before noting the 1992 L.A. Riots, a violent time between Black and Korean communities.

Indeed, the African Diaspora holds the painful story of slavery. Similarly, hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Indian people were indentured by the British; the Spanish empire also forced Filipinos into the Caribbean for the Galleon Trade. Even during the Civil Rights Era, Black icons like Martin Luther King Jr. collaborated with Asian American activists like Grace Lee Boggs and openly gay Kiyoshi Kuromiya, who marched on Selma with King.

There is another commonality between both communities: Afro Asian, and Blasian, mixed people. Pugh describes *Transference* as a very personal project to tell the story of her Afro-Japanese experience. However, very few other Afro Asian artists have been uplifted or noted as part of the canon. “There were none,” says Pugh when speaking on her research for the series.

Uplifting more Afro Asian art and stories can pave the way for healing between Black and Asian communities.

“Putting ourselves out there will really help in terms of starting the discussion,” says Pugh. “In hopes of decreasing the violence, the misunderstandings, the prejudices, automatic default of what we think Asian is.”

This expansive, inclusive nature of Afrofuturism, perhaps **AfroAsianfuturism**, offers a possible future where not only Black, African, and African Diaspora people are safe, but can peacefully coexist with and between Asian and other marginalized communities.

“Maybe there will be some sort of healing that can occur,” says Brown about her art. “If people just say you know what wow those are two different, totally different, seemingly different



ethnicities or cultures as it were. They exist on the same canvas. These are just two completely different ideas that are juxtaposed, yet they work.”