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KPop Demon Hunters

An Allegory of Collective Transformance and Healing

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Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.

- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet.

- Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

Abstract: At the time of this article's writing, KPop Demon Hunters (KPDH) has exploded to become a global phenomenon and the most watched film on Netflix of all time, with its soundtrack breaking similar records (Hatchett, 2025).[1] Using AEDP's ethos and orientation of "humility before phenomena" (Fosha, 2021, p.31), through this article we will seek to identify the transformance represented by KPDH to the of healing collective wounds. In Part 1, we will explore Cultural Attachment Theory, Korean history, and KPDH's role in repairing ruptures with Korean culture. In Part 2, we will explore how the film itself could be understood as a collective portrayal that helps us process State 2 affective experiences. Music and animation engage powerful right-brain to right-brain processes that allow us to bypass defenses and drop into State 2 (Harrison, 2019). In Part 3, we will metaprocess the healing effect this film has had on Asian American viewers in the U.S. who have suffered anti-Asian sentiment, rhetoric, and hate,

[1] This article was written assuming that the reader has seen the film. For a brief synopsis, see https://medium.com/@zduncan/kpop-demon-hunters-explained-9bfeaf5850ea

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including its uprise during the Covid-19 pandemic. The phenomenon of KPDH invites us to harness the moment and explore, "What is shifting? What went right?"

Part 1: Cultural Attachment Theory and a Case of Collective Transformance

Cultural Attachment Theory posits that attachment bonds individuals form with a culture are analogous to those between infants and their caregivers. When an individual has a secure attachment with a native or host culture (Hong, 2013), they are more resilient to the anxiety and stress associated with acculturation. Hong's study uses research from John Berry's (1990, 1997) conceptual framework on acculturation and intercultural adjustment research to identify the relationship between attachment and acculturation styles. Her study validates the following predictions:

- *Integration* (involvement in both the culture of one's origins as well as mainstream society) is associated with low anxiety and low avoidance in relation to both native and host cultural attachments.
- *Assimilation* (adapting to mainstream society and giving up one's own cultural identity) is associated with high anxiety and avoidance of native cultural attachment but low anxiety and avoidance on host cultural attachment.
- *Separation* (maintaining one's own identity and traditions without adapting to mainstream society) is associated with low anxiety and avoidance on native cultural attachment but high anxiety and avoidance on host cultural attachment.
- *Marginalization* (absence of contact with both cultures of one's origin and mainstream society) is high anxiety and avoidance on both native and host cultural attachment (Hong, 2013, p.1030, 1039).

According to Cultural Attachment Theory, a client may present with anxious attachments to culture that are implicit in their internal working models of relating, thereby limiting their

capacity to optimally adapt to an adopted culture, or to bicultural and multicultural settings. Being informed about acculturation strategies and their relationship to attachment styles could offer more explicit ways for a therapist to build safety with a client across any number of cultural backgrounds.

Attachment ruptures can also happen on a collective level due to war, displacement, racial trauma, and economic disparity. Building secure attachment bonds with symbolic ties[2] to one's native culture can provide protective factors through the support of existential values and a sense of meaning (Hong, 2017). This is a profound task with the modern disruptions we face in any culture today on a familial, societal, and systemic level. More than ever, we are interconnected yet, paradoxically facing ruptures around cultural and collective norms, and a greater uncertainty about which societal or political institutions we can trust (Chambers, 2025). Our trust muscles may feel fatigued, and our default pattern to self-protect and operate from a "hive mind" could lead to favor those within our group and become suspicious of outsiders (Chambers, 2025).

In 2021, Squid Games, a suspenseful Korean thriller was released on Netflix and quickly became the most watched Netflix show in history at that time. Although both Squid Games and KPDH have Korean themes with universal resonance, KPDH's happy ending and exuberant joy filled animation stands in stark contrast to Squid Games painfully isolating conclusion. Another obvious difference of course is that KPDH is a PG-rated animation while Squid Games is a very adult dystopian critique on economic inequality, competition, and wealth that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, felt all too real. There is something about Korean themes and storytelling that have universal resonance and reaches the collective in a profound way[3]. As a second-generation Korean American, I've observed this phenomenon as mostly an outsider. I've been fascinated by

[2] Hong's study discovered that one can form attachment to culture in its abstract, symbolic form. In the U.S., we have the Statue of Liberty, the Superbowl, McDonald's, etc. In KPDH, there are an endless number of symbolic and abstract representations of Korean culture, including kimbap (김밥), Horangi (호랑이) – Korean Tiger, Talismans (부적, bujeok), etc.

[3] For more background, here is an informative podcast with a Korean American discussing South Korean soft power, Korean social emotions of *han* and *jeong*, and comparisons between postwar Seoul, Tokyo and Berlin - https://open.spotify.com/episode/21nLikv3TO74FcTDAwd3Oq?si=r6l2cejxSheXuFCBjnkCig.

how the small, impoverished country of my parents' youth has become what it is today. What I discovered is that Hallyu – The Korean Wave, which includes the global rise of Korean soft power and cultural branding through kpop, kfilm, and kdrama, was in fact an intentional strategy by the South Korean government after the financial crisis initiated the IMF (International Monetary Fund) bailout in 1997 (Adams, 2022). Soft power was a term coined by Joseph Nye (2004) as "a country's ability to influence others' choices by persuading or co-opting rather than coercing. Instead of using a carrot and stick, soft power relies on positive associations with a nation's culture, foreign policy, and political virtues to attract others to its cause (Lee & Botto, 2020)." Because of South Korea's history and geopolitical vulnerability in Asia next to global heavyweights like China, Russia, and Japan, it has found a way to use its soft power to "punch above its weight class on certain transnational issues (Lee & Botton, 2020)," and use Korean culture for political and socioeconomic influence. The South Korean Model in a nutshell: "culture first, economics second (Adams, 2022)."

In this quest for survival, South Korea's success in overcoming poverty and establishing itself on the global stage is certainly not without a steep cost. Some have gone as far as stating that our modern paradigm of progress and development is unsustainable and in terminal decline (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). With modernity, we carry the complex paradoxes of war vs. humanitarian support, ongoing colonialism vs. reconciliation, imperialism vs. education, poverty creation vs. alleviation, and exponential growth vs. sustainability (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). South Korea is a prime example of a country that has lived through and continues to grapple with painful modern paradoxes.[4] With these impossible challenges, I can't help but wonder if collectivist cultures provide a way of addressing overwhelming aloneness around what can feel like collective "fear without solution" (Fosha, 2021, p.40).

Imbedded in Korean culture is a construct of social emotions that may provide an explanation for how it manages paradox and why there's a universal resonance to some of its cultural exports.

[4] In Volume 14 of AEDP's Transformance Journal, So-Yeon Kim & Danny Yeung highlight the important and unique benefits of AEDP's method of introducing healing from the get-go in South Korea. Due to limited access to mental health care in South Korea, where needs are statistically high, the first session can be critical. https://aedpinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Kim-%5E0Yeung-TJVol.141-1.pdf

As a collectivist culture, emotions are not only a personal experience but a social condition that can create relational harmony or negativity and violence (Park, 2022). Historically, Korean culture has an ethos of *pungnyu* (풍류)[5], which can be described as an aesthetic enjoyment of the flow of life (Park, 2022). The emotions coupled within this flow of life are *han* (한)[6] - collective unresolved grief, resentment and longing, shaped by historical trauma and oppression, and *heung* (흥) - shared, contagious joy, excitement, and exuberance, often expressed through collective music, dance, and play. The second coupling is *jeong* (정) – emotional affection, bond, relationship and *musim* (무심) – tranquil, serene, and unattached or careless and indifferent. Each emotion can be experienced in an adaptive or maladaptive form. The coupled emotions operate as dialectics, regulating and rebalancing each other to maintain homeostasis within a social system (Park, 2022).[7] If we integrate the AEDP model with these four emotions, transformance naturally supports this emotional flow of life. We can see how *jeong* resolves aloneness and creates strong relational bonds, leading to a safe container for the processing of *han* from a maladaptive state to an adaptive core affect. This releases new adaptive action tendencies along with *musim*, a differentiated self, and a spiraling transformational process energized by *heung*.

Throughout Squid Games, we see many elements of State 1 *han* and *musim* reflected through themes of class struggle, scarcity and competition along with the extreme measures that contestants would take to overcome their oppressed state. The anxiety, fear, isolation, and lack

[5] I'm mindful of the fact that these emotions deserve more than what the scope of this paper offers. Rather than focusing on exact definitions of these emotions, I'm exploring the experience of a collective dialogue about the emotions and how metaprocessing influences how groups further experience them.
[6] *Han* itself has become a storied emotion and concept throughout modernity, with an evolving discourse around its true definition. Some with an essentialist perspective believe that only Koreans who have lived it can truly understand *han*. Without minimizing the unique experiences in Korea, I'm of the belief that *han* can be a universal emotion experienced by any group that has faced historical trauma, oppression, grief and longing.
[7] Similarly, Sabrina (Yunshuo) Wei beautifully integrates Yin and Yang with AEDP and the dance of dialectics in her transformance article (Wei, 2025).

of safety that the collective was feeling during the pandemic as well as a rupture with capitalist ideals could be one reason why the show had such resonance with the public. It validated experiences of what could be described as social oppression, languishing (Fosha, 2021), and power over dynamics. Ben Medley's *Triangle of Social Experience*[8] (Medley, 2025, Manuscript in Preparation) offers a representational schema for conceptualizing how institutional and inter-relational oppression can be internalized, and how liberation from this oppression is also found through AEDP's four state model of transformation. The two variations of the *Triangle of Social Experience* are the *Triangle of Oppression*, depicting "power-over dynamics" and the self-at-worst, and the *Triangle of Liberation*, depicting "power-with dynamics" and the self-at best. Like AEDP's other triangle schemas, the *Triangle of Social Experience* offers a way to conceptualize a client's internal working models of self and other, and goes a step further by contextualizing these experiences within a larger group construct. Medley posits that attachment theory is foundational for understanding how social oppression is internalized (Medley, 2025, Manuscript in Preparation). "From an evolutionary standpoint, closeness and dependence on groups is arguably as fundamental an issue as closeness to an individual caregiver. As many evolutionary theorists have noted, our humanoid ancestors could not have survived outside of the group any more than an infant can survive without parental care (Smith, Murphy & Coats, 1999, p. 96)." Our sense of belonging, therefore, or our lack of belonging or status within an oppressive hierarchical group can shape our internal working models and attachment patterns. Consistent with findings in Cultural Attachment Theory, clients can develop a secure or insecure attachment to groups, which can affect their mental health and level of resilience. AEDP's transformance model maps out how attachment can determine whether a pattern of resistance, fueled by fear and dread, or transformance, driven by hope, is neurobiologically entrained (Fosha, 2006). Medley shows the importance of building relational security within a context that acknowledges power, privilege and oppression to entrain transformance. The Triangle of Social Experience validates the understanding in collectivist cultures that emotions are not only a personal experience but a social condition (Park, 2022). Within a safe, collaborative power-with

[8] Deep gratitude to Ben Medley for his invaluable contributions to our field with the development of the Triangle of Social Experience and for generously sharing his manuscript and ideas with me prior to publication.

relationship, making explicit what has been implicitly experienced in a social context, and having a corrective emotional experience can soften inhibitions and defenses, allowing for a more realistic and nuanced perspective, and a more effective self (Medley, 2025, Manuscript in Preparation). Furthermore, reclaiming one's narrative based on an appropriate understanding of power dynamics allows a client to externalize and systemically contextualize blame, creating an opportunity to find new meaning based on self-compassion rather than shame (Medley, 2025, Manuscript in Preparation).

If Medley's Triangle of Oppression explains the role of negative emotions in a social context, his Triangle of Liberation outlines how we harness the evolutionary function of positive emotions to entrain collective, inter-relational, and intra-relational transformance. In AEDP, Diana Fosha defines transformance as a fundamental need and "the overarching motivational force, operating both in development and therapy, that strives towards maximally adaptive organization, coherence, vitality, authenticity and connection. Residing deeply in our brains are wired-in dispositions of transformance (Fosha, 2006, p.4)." AEDP emphasizes the value of positive emotions, the upward spiraling of vitality and their entrainment as energy enriching, and why they are a "highly desirable goal for humanity (Fosha, 2021, p.385)." When we are in a state of wellbeing, we have greater empathy, altruism, and prosocial behavior (Fosha, 2021) that helps our social condition. Antonio Damasio further asserts that our evolutionary imperative to flourish, not only yields the required energy to survive, but also yields a surplus (Fosha, 2021). "This surplus of energy is necessary not only to promote survival but also to grow, develop, thrive, and progress; the surplus of energy is necessary to live and adapt optimally, to improve one's own lot in life as well as that of one's own offspring (Fosha, 2021, p.387)." This surplus of energy to flourish is what oppressed populations hope for when they strive to overcome intergenerational oppression and create a better life for their offspring. The Triangle of Social Experience elegantly explains how we get stuck in a spiral of social languishing that affects our collective, individual, and intrapsychic health, and how we move towards a path of upward spiraling towards collective, inter-relational, and intra-relational flourishing. When we have a realistic and nuanced appraisal of different groups and cultures, we create room for equity,

mutuality, and shared power in our journey towards flourishing (Medley, 2025, Manuscript in Preparation).

In contrast to Squid Games, KPDH reflects the upward transformance spiral through the processing of *han, heung, jeong, and musim*. Its universal resonance offers us a powerful green signal affect, an indication of our readiness for cultural integration and the possibility of repair. By celebrating the experience of cultural recognition, a spiraling process of collective liberation and transformance becomes possible.

A brief look at Korean history and the emergence of KPop Demon Hunters (KPDH)

The original idea of KPDH[9] came from director and writer Maggie Kang, a Korean Canadian who moved to Toronto when she was five. Kang describes her upbringing as securely integrated with both her love for kpop and Looney Tunes. This seamless integration of dual cultures reflected in the film comes from an identity that didn't choose one over another (Etalk, 2025, 4:00). Perhaps we could go as far as saying the film's creative essence came from Kang's core state or true self. The actors and singers behind Huntr/x[10] (the girlband and demon hunters in the film) are all Korean American, with bicultural identities as well. Although kdrama, kfilm, and kpop, most notably BTS[11], have been a growing part of our global culture within the last decade, Korean history and the migration history of Korean Americans to the U.S. is less well known.

[9] Further elaboration on KPop Demon Hunters (KPDH) will come later in the paper. For a synopsis, see: https://medium.com/@zduncan/kpop-demon-hunters-explained-9bfeaf5850ea

[10] Huntr/x is based on Mudang (무당), Korean shamans, who are historically female. They function as a bridge between the natural and supernatural world. What began as a rural and indigenous practice, Korean shamanism is still thriving in their contemporary culture today: https://fellowsblog.ted.com/in-21st-century-korea-shamanism-is-not-only-thriving-but-evolving-f1a8862a7bc8

[11] BTS is a kpop boyband from South Korea that has had overwhelming global success. Their lyrics touch on topics like mental health, self-love, youth struggles and societal issues. Staying true to their message, they took an indefinite hiatus in 2022 to focus on their individual lives and solo careers. "The members spoke about their mental and physical fatigue from the K-pop system, which 'gives no room for people's growth, and constantly forces us to make music,' as said by the band's leader RM (Choi, 2022)." This UN appearance offers a glimpse into their values: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXCqBotaGRI&list=PLwoDFQJEq_0aTLheFr8oaYfyjFMnX7m3k&index=6

Since my personal background is Korean American, I will focus on the U.S. experience as opposed to Canada as an example moving forward.

Since 1903, there have been three waves of immigration from Korea to the U.S. The first wave between 1903-1949 was mainly composed of laborers who moved to Hawaiian pineapple and sugar plantations to escape from famine and the political instability in Korea. This first wave of migration ended with the Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act).[12]

The second wave came between 1950-1964. Around 42,000 Koreans moved to America prompted by the devastation of the Korean War and massive waves of internal displacement. When Korea was liberated from 35 years of Japanese occupation in 1945 at the end of WWII, a regional power struggle began between Korea's north and south, and between communist and capitalist ideologies, drawing in global engagement from the U.S., China, and Soviet Union. Also known as "The Forgotten War" (Stack, 2018) the Korean War between 1950-1953, took almost 55,000 lives and ended with an armistice agreement rather than a peace treaty. The agreement included a formal demilitarized zone (DMZ) (Yarlagadda, 2021) along the 38th parallel, creating a buffer between North and South Korea, and effectively dividing the peninsula in half. The DMZ is roughly 155 miles long and 2.5 miles wide. Tens of thousands of families were separated across the border under the assumption that they would reunite at the end of the war. Although formal meetings were arranged through the Red Cross to reconnect these families, these reunions have been brief and far too few. At this time, "no facility exists for the continuation or proper restoration of the family ties broken 70 years ago:[13] there is no postal

[12] "The Immigration Act of 1924 shaped the U.S. population over the course of the 20th century, greatly restricting immigration and ensuring that arriving immigrants were mostly from Northern and Western Europe. It closed the door on almost all new Asian immigration and shut out most European Jews and other refugees fleeing fascism and the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe. One of the most restrictive immigration laws in U.S. history, it played a key role in ending the previous era of largely unrestricted immigration. Its numerical limits on annual arrivals and use of national-origins quotas, aided by Great Depression-era restrictions, limited religious, ethnic, and racial diversity, and sharply reduced the size of the country's foreign-born population for four decades (Chishti & Gelatt, 2024)"

[13] Today, there are ongoing movements in the U.S. to ritualize healing and release intergenerational trauma (https://www.jungwonkim.earth/work) as well as movements to mobilize peace in Korea (https://www.womencrossdmz.org/).

service between the two Koreas, no telephone or internet links, and citizens on both sides are legally forbidden from contacting each other across the divide (Foley, 2021)." During the war, the U.S. dropped 635,000 tons of bombs on the Korean peninsula. This outnumbers the bombs used by the U.S. in the entire Pacific Theater during WWII, destroying much of Korea's environment through scorched earth tactics. These bombs are still being uncovered today and causing accidental death from explosions on both sides of the DMZ. Heavily militarized and littered with landmines, after more than half a century of virtual isolation, the DMZ is emerging as a rich ecosystem where biodiversity flourishes and rare species are found to thrive (Bozorgmehr, 2019). Alongside it's experience of violence and extreme suffering, the DMZ is a hopeful reminder of our evolutionary programming to flourish and adapt optimally. As Antonio Damasio proposed, "all living creatures – not just humans, or even mammals, mind you – share the imperative of regulating life processes such that life can not only persist but also flourish and project itself into the future (Fosha, 2021, p.386)."

From the aftermath of extreme poverty, devastation and overwhelming grief, a collective discourse continued in postwar Korea on the definition of *han*. What is striking about *han* is that it is both felt as an emotion and metaprocessed as a concept that shapes and reshapes Korea's culture, resilience, and identity - past, present, and future (Hye Lim, 2019). This collective engagement with *han* connects people experientially to each other (*jeong*) and includes the mandate to persist, to overcome, and to find a way to flourish. "The meaning of *han* is not limited to sadness or mournfulness. That may be part of *han*, but *han* itself is deeper and more fundamental. Every living thing in the world possesses some degree of *han* and lives to resolve it. That is why *han* can also be a source of strength and a creative, life-steering energy (Hye Lim, 2019, p.55)" that drives transformance.

The third wave of immigration started in 1965 and continues today. During the 1960's to 1980's, high unemployment rates and political instability led to Koreans voluntarily moving to the U.S. for a better life. The children from this wave are now known as second generation (Gyopo 교포) Korean Americans (Chung, n.d.), including the actors and singers in KPDH. Although the film itself takes place in Seoul, the characters are English speaking with one

holding a bicultural identity. They wrestle with individual and collective *han* along with themes of displacement, generational trauma, shame and their personal hero's journey of following their biological imperative to heal, self-right, and flourish (Fosha, 2021).

Transgenerational trauma and the transmission of attachment ruptures

Studies on epigenetics and the children of Holocaust and 9/11 survivors have now demonstrated that a parent's traumatic experience can influence the stress patterns of their children (Yehuda et al., 2014) (Yehuda et al., 2016). In fact, what was discovered is that PTSD is in fact heritable, and without understanding this intergenerational transmission, a client's trauma symptoms could be difficult to understand based on their current life circumstances (Duncan et al., 2018) (Wolynn, 2016, p.33-34). Paternal PTSD can increase the likelihood of dissociation while maternal PTSD increases a child's difficulty with affect regulation (Yehuda et al., 2014). In *Volume 14/1* of *Transformance: The AEDP Journal*, H. Jacquie Ye-Perman (2025) insightfully describes how AEDP works well in addressing transgenerational trauma. She highlights the clinical challenges of working with transgenerational trauma when stories are often lost due to victims no longer being alive or are unable to pass on these stories due to overwhelming and unbearable pain. She further explains how AEDP's use of moment-to-moment tracking and metaprocessing within a safe attachment relationship can assist a client with processing their trauma and finding their differentiated self – an essential task for healing transgenerational trauma (Ye-Perman, 2025).

The three main characters in KPDH Rumi, Zoe, and Mira carry an inherited intergenerational coping style with the repeated mantra "our faults and fears must never be seen". It's a message that was taught by Celine, the older mentor and adopted mother figure to Rumi. It held all the good intentions of protecting their lives and preserving their safety but kept them easily in their State 1 defenses and inhibitory affects.

Survival messages and adaptations of an older generation, like Celine, often do not translate to new cultural or generational contexts. During the Korean War, neighbors who lived side by side throughout their lives turned on each other based on Cold War era fears and differing political

ideologies.[14] After the armistice, questions about who was on North Korea's side continued in South Korea and could lead to entire families being affected.[15] A mantra of safety first is what kept people alive. For descendants of these types of survival adaptations, the fear pattern of an immigrant parent, without historical context, could be confusing. When there is a lack of attachment to one's culture of origin, without clarity and context, invisible wounds such as ambiguous loss and psychological homelessness (Hardy, 2023) could make differentiation and appropriate adaptive action tendencies challenging. Cultural norms, such as maintaining group harmony over independence and individuality also gets easily lost in translation between eastern and western cultural ideals.

From a polyvagal lens, the quest to feel safe is "embedded in our DNA and serves as a profound motivator throughout our life (Porges, 2022, p.2)." For clients carrying a cultural and intergenerationally transmitted survival response that might be invisible to a clinician, polyvagal theory naturally assumes cultural humility to "understand behavior through the lens of a neurophysiological state, [and] shift from judgment to curiosity, from pathology to adaptation (Porges, 2025, p.169)." In AEDP, we also assume that "psychopathology reflects a person's best efforts at adapting to an environment that was a poor match for the person's emotional and/or self-expression. Thus, even the most self-destructive or disturbed presentations can be seen as manifesting hope, self-preservation and ingenuity (Russell & Fosha, 2008)." Misattunement in a clinical setting can occur without this stance of cultural humility or awareness that survival patterns have a wisdom in and of themselves. In KPDH, survival patterns could be understood through the cross-cultural symbolism of archetypes as a way for the mythology of demons and hunters to tap into our collective psyche and unconscious (Goodwyn, 2020). These archetypes,

[14] My own grandfather was almost executed by the North Korean army, until he escaped and hid beneath his floorboards for several months before General MacArthur took hold of Seoul. My father, who is 79 years old at the time of this article's writing, still remembers the smell of Seoul being bombed.

[15] For more background, here is a deeply moving podcast describing post-war trauma from a 1.5 and 2nd generation perspective. Linda Thai is a former child refugee from Vietnam and Jungwon Kim is a 2nd generation Korean American who recounts the late discovery of family members being executed due to their communist activities.
https://open.spotify.com/episode/3lcDu88Yoij1UhsxxJikA4?si=hG3G0FwLQmCJCmon5iYy_g

or patterns of behavior[16], despite compromising one's true self, can develop from the need to manage the shame and overwhelming aloneness of intergenerational trauma.

Invisible wounds of immigration and displacement

Korea's geopolitical position in Asia created inherent structural vulnerabilities throughout history including recurrent foreign invasion across all historical periods. Numbers have ranged from 10-15 major invasions (Baker, in progress) to minor incursions debatably reaching into the hundreds. This highlights the number of collective attachment ruptures that have occurred through multiple generations, along with the eventual forced division of land on the Korean Peninsula, separation between families for over half a century, distrust between neighbors, and new generations of the Korean diaspora that are navigating bicultural identities. Inevitably, many first-generation Korean immigrants see their move to the U.S. as a fresh start. Their bonds with Korean culture, the land, and their ancestors can feel conflicting or overwhelming if historical trauma has not been processed. What gets passed down varies with each family, and each sibling may have a different acculturation style. As research around epigenetics and transgenerational trauma has shown, even when survival patterns are not explicitly passed down, they are passed down through our parent's DNA as an adaptive stress (Wolynn, 2016) response. These implicit survival patterns are what we hope to make explicit and experientially process to completion.

Drawing from indigenous wisdom and her personal story, Linda Thai, a trauma therapist and Vietnamese Australian refugee, expands John Bowlby's model of attachment theory to include our bonds with land, culture, ancestors, time, and autonomous bodies outside the demands of capitalism (2025). In addition, Dr. Kenneth V. Hardy (2023) offers more language to the implicit suffering of people of color and identifies seven ways clients may experience these invisible wounds through: internalized (d)evaluation, an assaulted sense of self, learned

[16] In *Big Asian Energy,* John Wang (2025) outlines 7 common archetypes/patterns of behavior/false selves that are seen in the Asian community to survive and belong: the Achiever, the Fixer, the Chameleon, the Charmer, the Invisible One, the Commander, the Rebel.

voicelessness, psychological homelessness, complex ambiguous loss and collective grief, an orientation towards survival, and rage.

Navigating ruptures and invisible wounds as outlined by Thai and Hardy above, can result in survival patterns that may look like identity if cultural or racial trauma goes unaddressed. The intersectionality of sociocultural trauma is multilayered and complex. "Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma decontextualized in a people looks like culture (Menakem, 2017)." As transformance detectives, a culturally informed, explicitly empathic and attuned AEDP therapist could offer a space that welcomes the discovery of these layers with the knowledge that we all have a true core self that is ever present and neurobiologically wired in (Fosha, 2021).

In KPDH, the Huntr/x are tasked with sealing the Honmoon - a mystical shield that offers protection against an apocalyptic demon takeover. The literal translation of Honmoon (혼문) is "spirit/soul gate". Symbolically, sealing the Honmoon protects us from that which depletes the soul, or the invisible wounds of shame, oppression, and displacement. What we discover in the film is that the Honmoon is finally sealed when the characters not only find acceptance of their whole selves but also harmony and interdependence with each other. With Korea's history rooted in a heavily armed geographic separation between North and South Korea, the imagined sense of urgency to seal the Honmoon can also take on new meaning. "Traditional psychology says, what's wrong with you? Trauma-informed psychology says what happened to you? And then culturally informed psychology says, 'what happened to your people?' And liberation psychology says, 'And what continues to happen to your people (Thai, 2023, 6:17)?'" What our collective could be tapping into is a transition from solely focusing on the individual psyche to acknowledging our interdependence and need for each other on a larger scale. In 2025, Diana Fosha introduced liberation affects as the 7th transformational affect. She describes liberation as emerging "through the experience of freedom or feeling released from imprisonment, oppression, or constraint – whether that imprisonment, oppression, or constraint is the result of trauma, relational dynamics, intrapsychic patterns or social forces. The liberation affects might

emerge when clients experience the profound relief and exhilaration of shedding prescribed roles and living from their authentic core (Fosha, 2025)." Given Korea's history and rise from oppression and poverty, Korea's persistent drive to overcome (*han*) and experience liberation (*heung*) is built into their arts. Globally, coming out of the constraints of Covid, the fear and desperation reflected in Squid Games, and longing for hope and collective liberation, we seem primed for the exuberant phenomenon of KPop Demon Hunters.

Part 2: KPop Demon Hunters as a Collective Portrayal

In AEDP, a portrayal is an experiential technique that uses real or imagined scenes to have a reparative, feared, or wished for experience to deepen any affects that have been defensively excluded, release these through the body, and process them to completion (Fosha, 2000, 2021).

There have been several studies on the effect that movies have on our emotions and heart rate variability (HRV) (Wu, Gu, Yang, & Luo, 2019) (So, Li, & Lau, 2021). One such study (UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences, 2020) found a direct link between watching a film and its impact on our brain function, social connections, productivity, and creativity. They discovered that a viewer's heart rate and electrodermal activity (an indirect measure of emotional arousal) changes based on the events of the movie. Emotionally charged moments in the movie led to peaks in the physiological arousal of viewers in the study. Conducted in a theater, this study was able to track that HRV was synchronized with other viewers to the same emotional arousal in the movie, reflecting stronger social and emotional bonds. Viewers were asked about their feelings towards other moviegoers before and after the film and indicated feeling closer, even to strangers, after watching the film together. Although KPDH was initially released on Netflix, and not a theater, the collective dialogue happening in schools, families, podcasts, between friends, colleagues, and the like, could be contributing to strengthening social connections around shared emotional experiences through the film.

Diana Fosha describes image-based information processing as more "tightly wound with emotion than word-based strategies" (2021, p.229). In addition to images facilitating an affective experience, the fact that KPDH is an animated film creates an interesting portrayal

mirroring the refreshingly guileless emotional expressiveness of animated characters and perhaps connecting adults to their core affective experience. Ben Medley (Fosha, 2021) explains that "the more specific and vivid the imagery, the more dynamic and alive the experience may become (p. 229)." When working with traumatic memories, the power of portrayals lies in the idea that new contrasting emotional experiences along with the full expression of their adaptive action tendencies can create a corrective healing experience that replaces the behavioral, cognitive, somatic, and emotional manifestations of a traumatic event (Fosha, 2021). Along with images creating right-brain-to-right-brain communication (Schore, 2019), music works with these same neurobiological processes that facilitate attachment. Moreover, "it helps people develop and articulate a sense of identity, identify and express values, and experience a sense of belonging (Harrison, 2019, p.181)." Music can activate the limbic system, and parts of the brain responsible for emotions and memory, creating a natural process of unfolding into one's core affective experience (Harrison, 2019). This could offer another explanation for how KPDH as a musical, with its catchy emotive lyrics and dance moves, has bypassed potential defenses against anxious or ambivalent attachments with Korean culture.

A parallel process: Rumi and Jinu navigating AEDP's four-state transformational process

So far, we've mainly focused on our collective experience with KPDH, and the phenomenon of its meteoric rise in our global popular culture. If viewers are, indeed, experiencing a collective portrayal through KPDH, we can zoom in and get a glimpse of the what might be feeling universally resonant through the four-state transformational journeys of Rumi and Jinu.

State 1*:* Rumi, who is the lead singer of Huntr/x, shows defenses early in the film that are easily relatable. With a perfectionist, workaholic orientation, driven by the best of intentions to heal herself and save the world, Rumi has a history of hiding a generational secret that she is part demon. The harder she works to fix things (survival orientation), the more symptomatic her patterns become. She eventually starts to lose her singing voice, as her somatic patterns spread and become inflamed (learned voicelessness). In AEDP, we are trained to recognize even the smallest glimmers amid what may seem hopeless. Although her efforts to hide and perform are

the very behaviors that cause her pathology, they also reflect her drive to heal and transform (Fosha, 2021).

Jinu is the forbidden romantic counterpart to Rumi, who's pathology (internalized (d)evaluation and assaulted sense of self) is more entrenched and visible. His background includes abandoning his impoverished mother and sister after making a deal with GwiMa (the demon king) to live a well-fed life in the castle. He is eventually overcome by his own somatic patterns, voices of shame and self-hate. Before meeting Rumi, he endured this demonic state for 400 years. Jinu's character is an example of someone who carries moral injury and is stuck in a maladaptive pattern of shame and despair. Moral injury can be defined as "a deep soul wound that pierces a person's identity, sense of morality, and relationship to society (Litz, 2009, p. 695)." In addition, "moral injury distinguishes cultural trauma from other kinds of collective adversity, such as disaster or famine where the hardship does not necessarily challenge core human values and sometimes even strengthens them (Cherepanov, 2020)[17]." Amid Jinu's distress and demoralized state, he makes another deal with GwiMa to form a boyband Saja Boys[18] to battle Huntr/x. If this plan succeeds, he will be free of his memories and the emotional suffering of his shame. Jinu reflects glimmers of resilience by his persistent drive to heal himself, despite the ongoing harm his behaviors perpetuate.

State 2*:* These two characters, alone in their suffering, have their first transformative encounter of recognition when Jinu sees Rumi's patterns for the first time and protects her secret. Thus begins their process of co-constructing safety through numerous risks, ruptures, and repairs. Through the playful animation of kpop fueled fight scenes, we see Rumi working through her categorical emotions of anger, fear, and disgust towards demons as the feared/projected "other" and fighting to escape from her own shame. Eventually questioning an individual demon about whether he had free will, she is unable to accept song lyrics based on hate and explores the idea of demons having feelings and experiencing their own emotional pain. Through this process of

[17] Deep gratitude to H. Jacquie Ye-Perman, PhD for these quotes on moral injury, along with her ongoing AEDP supervision, support with organizing this paper, and discussions on transgenerational trauma.
[18] in Korean mythology the term 저승사자 (jeoseung saja) means "grim-reaper" or "messenger of the afterlife."

acknowledging a demon's "humanity", she meets her true self, and a true other through Jinu. In AEDP, rather than an idealized other, a true other is someone who is able to respond to what is emotionally necessary for the emergence of the true self (Fosha, 2000b). In this process of being fully seen, Rumi starts accepting all parts of herself and regains her singing voice. We see her exercising new adaptive actions tendencies and differentiating herself from Celine. Jinu also differentiates himself from GwiMa, sacrifices himself to save Rumi, and rediscovers his soul.

State 3: With a change-based orientation that seeks to draw out "what is healing about healing (Fosha, 2021, p.36)," metatherapeutic processing allows transformative experiences to be harnessed and amplified. "When new pursuits and experiences are accompanied by positive affect, they bring more energy into the system and recharge the spiral yet again. As we exercise our new capacities, they become part and parcel of who we are, new platforms on which to stand and reach for the next level (Fosha, 2021, p.37)." This process of amplifying, reinforcing, and consolidating positive change, fuels an upward spiral of more transformational cycles, new phenomena, and "broadened thought-action repertoires" (Fosha, 2009, pp202-203). "More begets more…The more we do something that feels good, the more we want to do more of it (Fosha, 2009, p.202)

In one of the final scenes of KPDH, we see Rumi with Mira and Zoe metaprocessing affects of gratitude and tenderness towards each other and feeling moved and emotional within themselves. They are crying tears of grief, liberation, mastery, joy and pride.

State 4: Rather than collapsing on the much-desired couch after the bathhouse, we see Rumi and Huntr/x feeling re-energized and engaging with their fans. Rumi's patterns are visible and healed, reflecting a core state or truth sense filled with calm, flow, and ease. The truth sense is the affective marker of the core state, marked by the rightness of one's subjective experience, where the core truth of the self can emerge: "This is me" (Fosha, 2021, p.47) which is similar to Martin Buber's I-Though or True-Self/True-Other relating (Fosha, 2021, Yeung, 2024).

Part 3: Harnessing and Metaprocessing Cultural Repair and a Collective Healing Moment

> The very act of being seen, understood, and witnessed begins to undo shame and aloneness. Connecting the dots between relational/emotional lessons learned in the context of past attachment trauma can bring meaning, cohesion, and understanding to current patterns of negative self-self and self-other relating. Seeing the invisible is a powerful experience of recognition that is profoundly transformative.
>
> *Fosha (2009, 2013a)*

With KPDH on repeat in so many homes, when "more begets more" (Fosha, 2009, p.202), a portrayal of overcoming oppression and shame resulting in hope, empowerment, collective harmony, and liberation can be quite profound. What I have seen in multiple interviews (Still Watching Netflix, 2025, 2:06) (Jacki Jing, 2025, 28:22) (Billboard News, 2025, 8:43) (Q with Tom Power, 2025, 16:56) is a description of Asian viewers of KPDH experiencing healing affects associated with feeling seen, moved, grateful, and a deeper sense of "this is me" and "this is us". There is a sense of delight and surprise by the recognition of what it means to be Asian, Korean or Korean American. In an interview with Jimmy Fallon on The Tonight Show (The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, 2025), one of the singers in Huntr/x, Audrey Nuna, describes a wave of emotion and transformation she experienced while watching the film. Here is a brief transcript of the interview:

Audrey Nuna: "I mean, this movie has affected us all so much on an emotional level. I'm emotionally constipated, so I take a very, very long time to process my emotions. But I guess I was due for a cry the day of the premiere, because literally five minutes into the film, I'm, like, bawling my eyes out. **[mourning-the-self affect]** And it's weird, because the thing that got me was seeing kimbap, which is a Korean food – it's like a Korean rice roll – animated on screen, because, I mean, I just grew up, I was one of very few Korean kids in my school district. So I would pack my kimbap in my lunchbox, you know, my container. And I would just be sneaking little pieces one by one because I didn't want the stanky kimbap to be the reason why kids would, you know, alienate me. **[metaprocessing, making sense of her experience]**

Jimmy Fallon: "So you would hide your own lunch." **[tracking, engaged]**

Audrey Nuna: "Yeah, I would hide it and I would just, you know, like, one piece at a time, close, one piece at a time, close (gesturing closing and opening her lunchbox). And I think that's a feeling so many Korean Americans can relate to growing up here." **[undoing collective aloneness]**

Jimmy Fallon: "That's so sad." **[explicitly empathic, co-engendering safety]**

Audrey Nuna: "It is really sad." **[receiving empathy and recognition]**

Jimmy Fallon: "You should be able to eat your lunch in front of the other kids … But I love that the first five minutes of the movie, you're seeing that and you go, that's what got you. You go, 'Yeah, already things are changing.'" **[affirming and attuned other, creating a corrective emotional experience]**

Audrey Nuna: "I didn't expect it. I was like, wow, that hit a nerve that, like, I forgot that I even had, you know? But I think that's a very relatable feeling for all of us." **[realization affects associated with new understanding, core state – this is me/this is us, self-compassion]**

The collective portrayal of KPDH has led to a profound moment for the Asian community where being fully seen is safe and celebrated. Something is shifting, something went right. What Audrey Nuna's interview exemplifies is an ongoing dialogue of metaprocessing healing affects through KPDH as well as opportunities for corrective emotional experiences and "processing the positive emotional consequences of 'having' (as opposed to 'not having') (Fosha, 2000b)." Jimmy Fallon started his interview by emphatically stating, "We have to talk about this phenomenon, KPop Demon Hunters" and later mirrors a reflection of Audrey Nuna's experience that 'Yeah, already things are changing', indicating a collective dialogue taking place metaprocessing a new healing moment for the Asian community.

What is shifting?

Among the many tragedies that came with the global Covid-19 pandemic, the U.S. saw a sharp rise in anti-Asian hate crime incidents from 2020-2023 (Ruiz, N. G., Im, C., & Tian, Z., 2023). The fear and uncertainty experienced during the Covid-19 epidemic may have opened pre-existing anti-Asian sentiment. Due to the myth of the model minority along with the tendency for Asians to underreport incidents of racism or to seek help for mental health issues, prior systemic and societal issues with racism towards Asians has been minimized.

The model minority myth of Asian Americans as high achieving, well-off and successful masks a lived reality that dismisses mental health concerns and a wide range of differences in social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. In fact, "research has increasingly documented the paradox that, despite high academic performance, young Asian American women die by suicide at an alarming rate" and is the leading cause of death for Asian American women between 20 and 24 years of age (Hahm, H. C., Liu, C. H., & Tompson, M. C., 2020, p.1199). Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the United States (Budiman, A., & Ruiz, N. G., 2021), and questions of how to serve the mental health needs of this population is a growing concern.

AEDP offers a paradigm where healing and suffering can exist side by side, where feeling bad and feeling good are not necessarily sequential but "intersect and intertwine" in a dynamic parallel process (Fosha, 2002). As it relates to the invisible wounds of cultural displacement and racism, the need for safety has led to defensive patterns that seem insurmountable at times. The phenomenon of KPDH offers an example of collective transformation, cultural repair and integration of Korean symbols (like kimbap, music, mythology) into what is mainstream, along with an overwhelming experience of what went right. In AEDP we bring attention to what is healing as much as we tend to a client's emotional pain. With awareness that negative emotions are often more familiar, we seek to metaprocess and deepen healing affects to build tolerance to our experience of them (Fosha, 2000b). "Contrast is an integral aspect of the experience of the healing affect: this is the joy experienced by someone who has known pain, the light

experienced after years of darkness, the experience of feeling understood after having felt misunderstood (Fosha, 2000b, p.8)." KPDH may not resolve every attachment rupture or invisible wound, but here's to celebrating a moment of 'having.'

Conclusion

During my research for this paper, I was fortunate to interview my parents about their experiences during the Korean War and their immigration journey to the U.S. in 1976. I've heard pieces of their story over the years but this time around it felt more purposeful, like I was rebuilding a bridge to a familiar past, like fragments were being stitched back together providing a sturdier sense of home.

My hope is that this paper offers a path for clients to discover any cultural and historical history that builds a more coherent narrative. One that gives "access to the full rim of our minds and are able to make sense of whatever elements of memory and ongoing sensation" (Siegel, 2007, p. 309) that may arise on one's journey towards flourishing.

Author's background: I am a U.S. born and trained, second-generation Korean American psychotherapist. I studied International Studies, with a focus on Western Europe and France, before obtaining my graduate degree in Marriage and Family Therapy. Like many other Korean Americans or Asian Americans who grew up as perhaps one of a handful in any given room, I was raised to assimilate into American culture and did not take interest in my Korean heritage until recently. I am deeply grateful for reconnecting with my cultural and ancestral roots, and how this has expanded my work with clients and the histories they carry with them.

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