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“You No Real Man”: Constructing Gender, Sexuality, and the Asian American Subject in Jana Monji’s “Kim”

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Jana Monji’s short story “Kim” was published in *On a Bed of Rice: An Asian American Erotic Feast* in 1995 and reprinted in the anthology *Bold Worlds: A Century of Asian American Writing* in 2001. This story portrays the relationship between two Asian American roommates in mid-1980s Los Angeles and offers a stunning plot twist that challenges readers’ initial interpretations of the characters as well as many assumptions and stereotypes about Asian American identity, gender, sexuality, and culture. I have been teaching this short story since 2003 in undergraduate courses ranging from “Introduction to Literature” (a required Core course) to “Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Writing” (an upper-level seminar for English majors). Rarely has a story excited, confused, and angered students so much as “Kim” does each semester; hence, its pedagogical value for introducing basic literary theory, heterogeneity within gender and sexual identities, and Asian American culture and history is immeasurable. In this essay, I will offer an overview of the story, my interpretations of the text, and the pedagogical strategies I use to introduce undergraduate students to concepts that often challenge their world views. Ultimately, this story offers students a fascinating read that piques their interest in deconstructing literature and culture, and also provides instructors with an accessible and multifaceted text through which to present the constructed nature of identity.

I begin by offering a detailed summary of the plot of “Kim,” as the story is not as widely known as it deserves to be. The first-person narrator of “Kim” is a shy young woman with no social life, who has moved into the apartment of Kim, a recent immigrant from Vietnam and a hair and make-up stylist on movie sets. Initially, the two have nothing in common except “the Asian factor”: the narrator studies late into the night at the college library and lives in sweatpants and ponytails, while Kim spends days working on movie shoots and off-days sleeping late and watching Vietnamese movies (Monji 213-14). The narrator is professedly naïve, saying, “I learned a lot about life from Kim. It was like Aesop’s city mouse and country cousin fable. . . . There was so much I didn’t know.” Kim takes a protective interest in her, showing her the best cheap eateries in the neighborhood, offering her rides home from the library at night, and warning her about white men who “only want one thing” and Asian men who are “nothing but paper dragons. They too afraid to spit fire, but they make good bonfire” (Monji 213).

Eventually, Kim coaxes the narrator to accept a make-over and go out dancing. After a few outings, the narrator is as confident in her black miniskirts, patent leather stilettos, perfect make-up, and heavy perfume as Kim is. Soon the

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two are hitting clubs every night, dazzling bouncers with their long legs and flirting with the white men who find them “exotic, but humble.” The two dance with these men, but never engage in any sexual activity with them. As Kim puts it, “We live in two worlds. One, real. Two, white boy fantasy” (Monji 215). Their motivation in going to these nightclubs seems to be simply to enjoy dressing up, dancing, and flirting – not to meet a future romantic partner.

Trouble soon appears in the form of two white men dressed in the “Don Johnson *Miami Vice* sleaze look,” who don’t appreciate their sexual advances being rejected (Monji 216). After being thoroughly groped, the narrator leaves the club in a panic. Kim drives her home, kisses her reassuringly at the door of their apartment, and then makes love with her. The next evening, the narrator responds to a knock at the apartment door, only to discover the two men from the night before, who apparently had followed them home. Calling her a “cock-teasing dyke,” one of the men throws her onto the bed with the intent of raping her, while the other sneeringly waits his turn. Kim arrives home just at that moment and says, “Hey, white boy. You no real man. You don’t know real man when you see one” (Monji 217). Kim stops the would-be rapists by revealing a trump card: *he* is a man. Appalled by their sexual attraction to a cross-dressing man, the men quickly leave the apartment as Kim triumphantly exposes his male genitalia. The story ends with Kim’s promise to the narrator: “Baby-girl, I told you about white men. You believe now? Don’t worry, baby-girl. I no paper dragon. I keep you safe” (Monji 218).

The plot twist of Kim being biologically male leads to the excitement, confusion, and anger I mentioned previously that students experience after reading this short story. Even the most indifferent student will come to class with questions and ideas to discuss about this story, presenting a key opportunity to discuss our role as readers, our assumptions or stereotypes about gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, and the potent critique that literature offers to society. In general, the students arrive to class either excited about the plot twist or confused about whether they understood the end of the story correctly. (A small minority of students simply misses the crucial revelation and does not realize that Kim is male until discussion begins.) The disparate responses to Monji’s story offer an excellent opportunity to discuss reader-response theory before turning to the concepts of gender and sexual identity that Monji challenges in this text.

Undergraduate students in introductory classes often have not considered the relationship that exists between themselves and the text. Instead, they see a piece of writing as the conduit for presenting certain information that they as students should absorb passively, and about which there are primarily right and wrong answers regarding the content. Monji’s story allows students to see very clearly how they themselves have constructed meaning using their own implicit beliefs when reading literature. As Lisa Schade Eckert writes, “Reader-response theory assumes that a text cannot be understood apart from the response it elicits from the reader because it is the emotional and intellectual response of the reader that gives the text meaning in the first place” (62). Drawing on the ideas of critics Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish, Eckert points to the existence of gaps in the text that the reader fills with her own assumptions. She further explains:

The text as it stands on the page is incomplete, it is simply a set of instructions for creating an imaginative work within the mind of the reader. This indeterminacy, however, “stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said . . . it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning.” (63)

Monji’s plot twist of Kim being a man succeeds in surprising most readers because of this very phenomenon of readers filling in the gaps. The gaps that exist in this short story are easily filled with stereotypes about gender, sexuality, and ethnicity; and it is when Monji finally presents definitive information about Kim’s sex that readers’ own assumptions are then made visible and duly challenged. I begin the class discussion by summarizing reader-response theory and explaining how each reader fills in the gaps in a text in a different way. We then turn to the primary gap in Monji’s story – Kim’s biological sex – and examine why most readers believe Kim is female until the end of the story.

I first confirm that Kim is indeed a man and then ask the students how Monji was able to obscure this fact for most of the story. The most obvious answer is Monji’s technique of writing the story without using pronouns in reference to Kim until he confronts the would-be rapists, when we then read that Kim “sauntered up to the short man, walking *his* Saigon slut strut and running *his* fingers up the man’s chest” (Monji 217, emphasis added). To this point, Monji had used Kim’s name in place of pronouns, despite the awkward sentence constructions that sometimes resulted from this technique, as seen in the following passage: “[The short man] sat next to Kim. He leaned over and said something to Kim. Kim shot me a look of disgust, but still got up to dance. Kim was a good dancer. I liked watching Kim dance” (Monji 216). Initially, the lack of pronouns referencing Kim seems to be a stylistic quirk of the author, one that mimics Kim’s own imperfect English. The dearth of pronouns also emphasizes the narrator’s fascination with her roommate, as the passage above demonstrates: the narrator is fixated upon Kim dancing rather than observing the short man, who will prove dangerous later on. Monji’s repetition of the name “Kim” and the lack of pronouns focus attention upon the person, rather than the gender of that person, something we readers recognize in retrospect.

Students also point to behavioral and personal characteristics as evidence of how Monji is able to obscure the fact that Kim is a man. Topping the list are Kim’s name, occupation as a hair and make-up stylist, and predilection for platform shoes and skin-tight miniskirts when going out to a club. These observations allow the conversation to move beyond the story itself to a discussion of the difference between sex and gender, information which may be brand new to students in introductory classes. I begin by defining sex as the biological features that distinguish women and men (most clearly understood by students as one’s genitalia) and gender as the socially-constructed traits, behaviors, and roles that are expected of the different sexes within specific cultures. With this difference explained, we return to the text to find passages that *seem* to code Kim as feminine. Students often point to the following line: “Opening up a great hot-pink plastic tool box, Kim washed my hair, cut and sprayed” (Monji 214). The class generally agrees that American culture has coded the color hot pink as feminine, and it therefore would be unlikely for a man to

own a “great hot-pink tool box.” Similarly, Kim’s enthusiastic dancing to Madonna in the apartment is seen as demonstrating a feminine preference in musical tastes; for while Madonna was incredibly popular in the mid-1980s when the story is set, few students believe a man would choose to listen and dance to her music in the privacy of his home. The evidence most often stated by students, however, is Kim’s attire for a night of clubbing: “Kim came out dressed in high black platforms, a skin-tight leather miniskirt studded with silver and a low-cut black blouse” (Monji 215). High heels, skirts, and blouses, the students assert, are meant to be worn by women, as they demonstrate or enhance a woman’s femininity. In other words, these clothes code that body as feminine – and biologically female – to observers; therefore, upon seeing Kim wearing gender-specific clothing such as high heels and a short skirt, we assume Kim’s body to be anatomically female. Yet a line from Kim easily explodes these expectations; he says to the narrator, “Beauty, it’s just dust and imagination” (Monji 215). It is easy to adapt his words – “Gender, it’s just imagination” – to explain how thoroughly Kim fools observers into thinking he is a woman by simply wearing feminine attire and make-up.

After the students offer a list of the traits or actions that seemingly code Kim as feminine – and thus female – we revisit these traits to ascertain whether they are assumptions based upon broad mandates of American culture rather than impartial facts, and if there are any commonly known exceptions. I begin with Kim’s first name (incidentally, we are never given his surname). I agree with the students that in American culture, Kim is usually a shortened version of the female name Kimberly; indeed, I tell them that my own sister’s name is Kim. I then point out that in various Asian cultures, Kim is a common first name for a man; and usually a student will then recall knowing a man named Kim or reading Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*.¹ I also tell students that my own first name, Robin, is a common first name for a man in many parts of the world, and that more than once my journal articles have been cited using masculine pronouns rather than feminine (“He argues in the essay...”). Taking a global perspective, the names Kim and Robin are gender-neutral, not female. I then ask students to think of other first names that are given to persons of both sexes; the resultant list often includes Parker, Ryan, Sasha, and Alex, names that are not associated with Asian cultures specifically. Hence students also realize that associating gender with a name (here, Kim) is not directly related to that person’s ethnicity (Vietnamese, in Kim’s case, or Asian, to speak more broadly), but instead occurs across cultures. Monji’s strategy of using a gender-neutral first name, then, could appear in literature of any ilk where the author wishes to emphasize an individual instead of that person’s sex or gender.

¹ Another fruitful discussion may occur when discussing the name “Kim” as a surname. I point out to students that Kim is a popular Korean surname. While Monji does specify Kim’s ethnicity as Vietnamese, not Korean, she does not pin down the narrator as more than “Asian.” Several times in the story Monji underscores a pan-Asian identity, rather than demanding the characters be understood specifically based on ethnic origin. For instance, while the two are applying perfume, Kim uses Opium, saying “It like history, you know. China and white man,” and the narrator uses Shalimar, named after the Persian word for abode of love (Monji 215). By applying a Vietnamese and pan-Asian ethnicity to Kim, and the latter to the narrator, Monji allows stereotypes about Asians more broadly to inform her story. She subsequently challenges and dismantles many of these stereotypes, as I demonstrate later in the essay.

Other behaviors or traits that the students reexamine include Kim's profession as a hair and make-up stylist and his attention to his appearance, particularly when cross-dressing. Upon realizing Kim is male, students are quick to admit that they relied upon gender stereotypes when reading about Kim working in make-up and hair styling. Just as professions such as nurse and teacher were once primarily fulfilled by women, those persons styling women's hair and applying make-up were assumed to be women themselves. Students are quick to realize this faulty logic, however, and to name men influential in the fashion and beauty realms or even to announce that their own hairdressers are persons of the opposite sex. Indeed, they soon come to the conclusion that there are few, if any, professions in the United States today that are completely associated with one gender. Similarly, students realize that Kim's meticulous attention to his and the narrator's beauty routines – Monji offers five paragraphs detailing the careful application of make-up and perfume, styling of hair, and selection of clothing – is not a function of sex and gender, but of personal interest and self-promotion. A female student inevitably will describe a male friend or boyfriend who spends more time in front of a mirror tending to his hair and clothing than she herself does, an announcement that emphasizes the genderless nature of personal grooming habits: either a person is interested in his/her appearance or s/he is not. Kim's profession and grooming habits, then, cannot be used as a definitive marker of his sex or gender.

After examining some of the many gender assumptions that students had used to understand the story, I point to passages in the text where Monji made reference to, or at least hinted at, Kim's actual sex and, at times, gender identity. Quite often these passages have been ignored in favor of the supposedly more obvious gender determinants discussed previously. Recall the discussion of Kim's enjoyment of Madonna songs. The phrase used by Monji is that Kim "would sometimes dance half-naked" to Madonna songs in the apartment (214); and this description makes sense when we picture Kim shirtless, a sartorial privilege primarily allowed to men. Indeed, we soon realize that Kim only cross-dresses occasionally – only, in fact, when going to the best nightclubs in Los Angeles – and usually wears clothing denoting masculinity in his everyday life. For instance, when working at his second job at the Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant, he dresses as a man, wearing pants and pulling his long auburn hair into a bun. When the narrator and Kim first begin going to clubs, Kim wears "tastefully tight black pants with rather understated silk shirts" (Monji 214). It takes a careful reader to realize that Kim is dressing as a man here. This masculine gender identity is confirmed when we learn that the more exclusive clubs admitted "only . . . certain girls and very few couples" and "One night, we couldn't get in at all." With Kim dressed as a man and the narrator as a woman, they are one of the couples unable to gain admission to the club. Kim's response is, "Kiss ass. I get even. You see, next time we have good laugh." For their next venture, Kim wears the aforementioned platform heels, tight miniskirt, and low-cut blouse (Monji 215). Thereafter, the two have no problem getting into the best clubs in L.A., because Kim dresses as a woman, and one who the narrator admits "gets all the looks" (Monji 213).

Yet to achieve this sexy feminine appearance, Kim must manipulate his physique, and Monji also does not omit these details. She writes: "After selecting our costumes and taping for cleavage ('I learn this from pageant,' Kim confided),

we would meet in the bathroom. Our mirror ritual would begin with careful plucking of facial hair. 'I no like Brooke Shields. Look like man or horse,' Kim would say" (Monji 215). Knowing that narrator is female, readers may assume that the two use tape to create cleavage because of having small breasts; later we realize for Kim it is because he has no breasts. Interestingly, Kim overtly acknowledges his lack of breasts in the second paragraph of the story when he tells the narrator, "'Those silly white bitches think you need breasts. You just need attitude. Look like yes, but say no. Men like what they can't have'" (Monji 213). The other significations of gender distract readers from this important passage. The plucking of facial hair seems to imply the shaping of eyebrows, especially because of the reference to Brooke Shields, who sported prominent eyebrows in the 1980s. However, while the narrator may be shaping her brow, Kim most certainly is removing stray hairs from his cheeks, upper lip, and chin. Through the careful application of make-up, perfume, and ultra-feminine clothing, Kim completes his transformation into the most beautiful woman at the nightclub. Here I also remind students of another important tenet of reader-response theory: "Each reading of a text is an 'event' that will never be exactly the same again, even if the same reader reads the same text" (Eckert 63). Knowing the plot twist in "Kim," upon rereading the story we will not fill in certain gaps left by Monji with our assumptions that this person is female. Instead, we will focus our interpretative action upon other aspects of the text.

At this point in the class discussion, I introduce the concept of the performativity of gender, using the ideas of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to guide the discussion. I offer Judith Butler's statement: "There are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality" (25). Certainly the discussion had by the class just previously about Kim's cross-dressing underscores this idea. Marlo Edwards cogently summarizes another important idea offered by Butler: "In *Gender Trouble* Butler points out that gender itself relies on principles of performance ('persistent impersonation' [viii]) as well as parody. Thus gender, according to Butler, is always unstable and must continually be inspected, repaired, and regulated vis-à-vis compulsory heterosexuality" (422). Important to stress here is Butler's concept that gender performativity is not a self-conscious act. Instead, "For Butler, there is no agency in the sense of a voluntarist subject, as actors are little more than ventriloquists, iterating the gendered acts that have come before them. The only way out of this performative trap is resignification, which if done appropriately (and Butler points to the recent in-group reclaiming of the word 'queer' here as well as drag performance) can turn this iterability on its ugly head and betray its constructed nature" (Hall 186). Kim's cross-dressing demonstrates this resignification of gender to readers and allows us to realize how other versions of gender are constructed by the characters in Monji's story.

The end of the story certainly points readers toward understanding this constructed nature of gender once Kim's sex is revealed. Students may grasp how Kim performs gender, primarily because of the seemingly contradictory pairing of male anatomy with female gender performance. It is important to note to students, however, that the cross-dressing Kim is not the only character who manipulates the body and viewers' expectations in order to create a specific gender identity. The narrator, too, performs one version of gender in the apartment and another when out at the nightclubs. The beginning of the story

describes the narrator as dressed in “the usual sweatpants and ponytail.” Her standard performance of gender is asexual or even gender-neutral while she spends her time studying. After a month of living together, Kim offers to help her transform her appearance, saying, ““You know, you could be real good looking. Hot stuff. You just need little change”” (Monji 213). Once her classes end and the summer begins, the narrator agrees to the make-over: ““I give you my fuck-me look special. . . . Trust me, baby-girl. You look nice yuppie tomorrow. I make sure,” Kim said, and fiendishly began the transformation” (Monji 214). Recall that Monji writes five paragraphs to describe this transformation, via clothing and make-up, that the both of them undergo before heading out to the clubs. Using the tricks of his trade in the movie industry, Kim creates a “fairy-dust” for the two to apply to their faces, necks, and shoulders to give “an otherworldly glow” (Monji 215). The narrator’s description of their clubbing routine underscores the idea that they are living in a liminal space based on imagination and fantasy: the two select “costumes” for the evening and “walked incognito, nighttime creatures feeding off the fantasies of strangers” (Monji 215-16). It is clear that the gender identity they perform – the ultra-feminine, highly erotic woman – is a construction that not only Kim, but the narrator also puts on. Their daily performance of gender identity does not correspond to this evening transformation, with the narrator presenting an understated, almost asexual feminine and Kim being biologically and sartorially male in most of his life. Yet both choose to perform a hyper-female gender identity in the evenings. Monji’s connection of this performance of the female with the ideas of fantasy underscores the inherent instability of gender. Gender, it seems, is a figment of our imagination; and the perfectly-dressed-and-coiffed, sexually-available woman, in particular, exists only in male fantasies. For Kim, specifically, gender is a tool he uses to get what he wants, and initially, all he wants is a fun evening of dancing at the best clubs.

While Monji’s short story offers a clear demonstration of the constructed nature of gender for students, it also provides ample opportunity to discuss sexual identity and its connection to sex and gender. Kim’s sexual preference is indeterminate: he flirts and dances with men at nightclubs, but has sex only with the female narrator. The narrator’s preference, too, is ambiguous. She asks Kim tentative questions about what men like, but finds herself attracted to “the feel of soft hairless skin slipping tenderly against [her] own” – that is, Kim’s face, plucked clean of any facial hair in order to appear as feminine as possible (Monji 216). Is she attracted to Kim as a man or Kim as a woman? It’s not clear. Although the two engage in heterosexual intercourse, they are not easily categorized as simply heterosexual.

Even the would-be rapists at the end of the story demonstrate the flexibility of sexual identity. Initially, their gender performance is hyper-masculine. Their attire – the “Don Johnson *Miami Vice* sleaze look” – references the popular 1980s television show whose detective protagonists juggled fast cars, beautiful women, and crime fighting, all of which are symbolically phallogocentric preoccupations. Their attitude toward women is aggressive and condescending. Kim recounts the words of the short man, ““Last night, you say you win toss-up. I yours. You say you give me good time”” (Monji 217). These words emphasize the sexist assumption that a woman may be “won” in a coin toss and possessed at will. The narrator is angered and frightened when the tall man forces his

advances on her, placing his hand on her inner thigh and kissing her immediately after sitting down next to her. Their version of masculinity also is devoid of consideration of a woman's own desires. After Kim and the narrator reject their sexual advances and go back to their apartment, the two men follow them and witness Kim kissing the narrator "like a lover" (Monji 216). Clearly intending to enforce heteronormativity and masculine privilege, the two men return to the apartment the next night to punish the two for being "lesbians" and to "convert" them to heterosexuality via the experience of male penetration. As the tall man says the narrator, "'I'll show you what a real man feels like . . . You dykes are afraid of real men, but you'll like it . . . You just need a good one'" (Monji 217). That the narrator is fighting to get away and saying "no" means nothing to this man who intends to assert his masculinity via forced intercourse. This performance of an extreme version of masculinity – a violent, aggressive, dominating masculinity – traditionally is tied to a heterosexual sexual identity; that is, a man's heterosexuality is publicly verified when he acts in such a way. According to these standards, the two men are heterosexual, masculine men.

What complicates their seemingly incontrovertible heterosexual and masculine identities is their sexual attraction to a cross-dressed Kim, a complication that leads to a fruitful discussion amongst students about the connection between gender and sexual identity. Both men were undeniably attracted to Kim, resorting to the coin toss to decide which of the two would hit on the sexiest "woman" in the club. Interestingly, it is their confusion about this sexual attraction that stops their rape of the narrator from occurring. Kim appears in the doorway of the apartment just as the tall man is about to rape the narrator. He had been working at the Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant, so he is dressed in masculine attire. The tall man doesn't recognize him, saying, "'Who the hell are you?"; and the short man is speechless in his recognition of the sexy woman from the previous night (Monji 217). The men have shown themselves willing to be violent – the tall man slaps the narrator and pins her down on the bed – but the mere sight of Kim renders both men incapable of action: impotent, if you will. Their hyper-masculinity deflates upon realizing that they were attracted to another man. Kim then taunts them with the idea of homosexual intercourse:

"Who want me first?" Kim smiled coyly. "White boys like rice queens with tight asses." The short man shook his head. "Maybe you hit wrong club, white boy. Go look for white love. Maybe you get three-way boy love."

"No," the short man said. "I like women."

"White boy don't even know woman when he see," Kim laughed.

"I know women," the taller man stuttered, staring uneasily at Kim. (Monji 217)

The two men are stunned to realize that they could feel sexual attraction for a male body, even though that body was enacting an ultra-feminine gender identity at the time. This moment is key in demonstrating the separation of sex and gender from sexual preference. In an ironic turn, these two men acknowledge the power of Kim's penis as a threat to their masculinity, because they were sexually attracted to that very body. Just as they were prepared to use their penises to enforce heteronormativity on a supposedly queer female body, Kim could use his penis on them to produce queerness via homosexual

intercourse. Rather than affirming masculinity and male power, and therefore the primacy of heterosexuality and masculinity, the penis itself is queered. This reversal of the penis from an instrument of heterosexual domination to one of homosexual domination is affirmed when, as the two white men are leaving the apartment “puzzled and angry,” Kim exposes his penis to them (Monji 218). This graphic moment is quite important. The exposure of the penis to another man, or to a woman, signifies male aggression. Simply put, exposing one’s penis is shorthand for the words “fuck you,” or, more completely, “I could fuck you with this penis.” When this exchange occurs between a man and a woman, the woman is being taunted by the man’s threat of removing her free will: the intercourse supposedly could happen whether or not she wishes it to occur. When the exchange occurs between two heterosexual men, the man viewing the penis is being taunted with the threat of having his heterosexuality (and thus masculinity) taken away: the intercourse could turn a straight man into a queer one. Considering how often the word “faggot” is used amongst heterosexual men as a slur or insult – indeed, the word derives its very power from the notion that no heterosexual man would want to be mistaken for a homosexual – Kim very effectively turns the tables on the two white men by demonstrating that he too could use his penis as a threat of rape.

Yet Kim’s gesture is more than the replication of a heterosexual tradition of using the penis to dominate. Kim demonstrates that sexual identity, by way of sexual attraction, occurs along a continuum of possibilities. The two white men who believe themselves to be entirely heterosexual may still be attracted to a male body. We may judge Kim and the narrator using the same continuum. Both may be primarily heterosexual, as their consensual intercourse appears to indicate, but their sexual attractions are more nuanced than the strict label of “heterosexual” allows. Often I turn to Sedgwick’s ideas to explain to students the idea of the heterogeneity within sexual identity. As Eric Savoy summarizes, “Sedgwick thus redirects critical attention from the coherent ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ poles of the continuum to what she calls its ‘treacherous middle stretch,’ where, she demonstrates, a ‘different and less distinctly sexualized range of categories needs to be opened up’” (412). Monji’s text moves beyond the theoretical to demonstrate how these issues play out in (fictional) people’s lives.

While “Kim” may be used quite effectively to demonstrate to undergraduates the complexity of gender and sexual identities, it is important to ground the discussion of the text in Asian American history and culture as well. As Sau-ling C. Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana write, “gender and sexuality in Asian American literature cannot be understood apart from Asian American history. The emergence, transformation, or persistence of specific gender and sexuality themes is always tied to historical conditions” (175). I’ve found that students tend to interpret Kim’s lifestyle as demonstrating the malleability of the American dream: that Kim, as a recent arrival from Vietnam, is able to choose his gender and sexual identity, as well as other critical life factors such as employment and educational advancement, according to his own desires. Such a reading, however, proves too simplistic when Asian American history is considered. Monji offers a more complicated portrayal of Kim’s freedom of choice, grounding his chameleon-like persona in personal and historical trauma. Thus we must uncover the origins of why Kim learns to cross-dress in Vietnam

and of his scorn for white men to understand his performances of gender identity in his present-day life in Los Angeles.

Within the short story, we readers find a few crucial clues that provide insight into Kim's past life in Vietnam. Kim comes to the United States after the Vietnam-U.S. war ends, in all likelihood as part of the second wave of refugees from Southeast Asia. It is helpful to offer some details to students about these refugees. In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, David Palumbo-Liu explains:

There were two major waves of refugees: those arriving in 1975, as part of American-sponsored evacuation and coming directly to refugee camps on the U.S. mainland, and "boat people" and overland refugees, who spent considerable time in refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and other parts of Indochina....The economic and social status of these two groups differs significantly: while the first wave of Indochinese refugees tended to be relatively well-educated, proficient in English, and experienced in urban living, this second wave was poorer, less educated, typically did not possess the skills needed for employment in a technologically complex society, and was in greater need of federal assistance. Comprising the "largest nonwhite, non-Western, non-English-speaking group of people to enter the country at one time," they became trapped in low-wage service sector jobs. (237)

Kim's employment history matches this latter group of refugees. While initially he was a student, he ends up instead working part-time in the movie industry and in a restaurant. He judges his new life in America harshly: "My life, like this shit," Kim once said, turning on the garbage disposal to whirl away the remains of our stir-fry dinner" (Monji 213). While we could read this line as his desire to start a new life and dispose of the old, it becomes clear that the past is not easily discarded, for we also learn the tragic impetus for his cross-dressing: "My mother taught me how. You know, best bucks go to best-looking girl," he wryly informs the narrator during her initial make-over. In order not to starve during wartime, his mother taught him how to dress as a female in order to prostitute himself to American soldiers. The narrator confirms this when she says, "I had never known war nor sold spring to quiet my stomach. Kim had" (Monji 213). It is also possible that Kim's mother herself was a prostitute, and that Kim observed his mother's practices before emulating them himself. Amy Sueyoshi, in her article "History of Asian American Sexuality," reminds us of the traumatic experiences of many Southeast Asian refugees fleeing to the United States beginning in the late 1960s:

Mounting sociopolitical dislocations in Southeast Asia forced refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to flee their homelands. Women escaping in small boats encountered sexual assault by pirates. Those crossing by land endured sexual torture by marauding soldiers and within the refugee camps. In the 1970s displaced Southeast Asian refugees carried these haunting memories to the United States. (n. pag.)

Although we know only the briefest details about Kim's past in Vietnam, it is clear that he too brings his traumatic memories with him to the United States. Most important, though, is that Kim's cross-dressing in Vietnam allowed him to survive the war, unlike others of his generation. For instance, Mother-lady, the proprietor of the Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant where Kim sometimes works, loses her children during the war, and she looks after Kim and the narrator as surrogate children in Los Angeles.

Kim's traumatic past forces students to make a thorough reconsideration of his interaction with the white men he meets at clubs, as well as his relationship with the narrator. On the first night that Kim dresses as a woman to get into a club with the narrator, he sees the bouncer looking at him: "Kim stooped over sideways to give him a good view, pretending to pull up the stockings – not quickly, but slowly. 'Give man his money's worth, baby girl. Gotta sell merchandise,' Kim hissed with a false smile" (Monji 215). Thus, we can see that Kim's performance of the female gender is fraught with complications. Kim is not simply putting on femininity to get into a good club; he is replicating his traumatic past encounters with American soldiers, selling himself to "survive," and thrive, in America. He does not sell sex to these Americans, as he did in Vietnam; instead, we hear his "standard lose-them line" in the clubs is: "You nice fella, but my family don't like no white boys. But white boys so nice looking and fun to dance with. I can't bring you home. No, I can't go your place. I get killed if I don't make breakfast for old man" (Monji 215).² He does sell the sight of himself as a beautiful Asian woman, however, to those persons who can bring him benefits: the bouncers who control admittance to the best clubs and the men in the clubs whose desire for this body makes Kim's presence in the club an asset. Although Kim willingly trades the sight of his body for tangible rewards – that is, this sale of his body is not a matter of life and death, as it was in Vietnam during the war – we may better understand now his disdain for the "buyers" of this spectacle. Kim despises the American servicemen who bought his body in Vietnam. We here remember Kim's admonition to the narrator that white men "only want one thing" and his look of disgust when the short white man tells him at the club that he won Kim in the coin toss and will give "her" a good time. Kim loathes these men for viewing his body as a sexual commodity to be purchased, possessed, and discarded. His revenge upon American men for using his body in Vietnam is to taunt them with what they cannot have: he literally will not sell his body for sex to them. Psychologically, it goes even deeper: Kim relishes his knowledge that these men covet the female body they imagine he possesses but that they may never have, because it, in fact, does not exist. Recall Kim's words to the narrator when they are denied admission to a club with Kim dressed as a man: "'Kiss ass. I get even. You see, next time we have good laugh'" (Monji 215). When presenting his body as an ultra-feminine Asian woman, Kim exacts revenge upon proxy American males for the traumatic historical circumstances that forced him into prostitution years before, the memory of which he cannot forget. Presenting information about the Vietnam-U.S. war and

² Although Monji's story focuses on Kim's interactions with the white men who served in Vietnam, it is important to remind students of the multiracial demographics of the American servicemen in the Vietnam-U.S. war (see Palumbo-Liu 253).

delving into Kim's past productively complicates the students' understanding of Kim and his choices.

Not only should this historical information be presented during class discussion, but it is also important to note that stereotypes about Asian American sexuality inform both the characters' and the readers' understandings of Kim's body. In her article "Such Opposite Creatures': Men and Women in Asian American Literature," Elaine H. Kim writes: "In the peculiarly American tangle of race and gender hierarchies, the objectification of Asian Americans as permanent political outsiders has been tightly plaited with our objectification as sexual deviants: Asian men have been coded as having no sexuality, while Asian women have nothing else" (69). This stereotype about Asian American women has roots in the immigration patterns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the first Chinese and Japanese immigrant women arrived on the West Coast, oftentimes to work as prostitutes. However, even as more women arrived to marry and begin families with the Asian men already living in the United States, the automatic assumption of Asian women as being sexually available persisted:

[S]tereotypes of Chinese women as willing prostitutes abounded. Few Chinese women could escape the label regardless of their actual status. Census takers in San Francisco recorded nearly every Chinese woman they counted as a prostitute despite evidence that indicated otherwise. Immigration and law enforcement officials also aggressively interrogated Chinese women about their sexuality to bar their entry or find grounds for their deportation. The 1870 Page Act that prohibited the entry of "immoral" women established the legal foundation to harshly scrutinize Chinese women's sexuality in particular. (Sueyoshi n. pag.)

Because many Japanese women arrived as "picture brides" and quickly established themselves as wives and mothers in a traditional home setting, they escaped the automatic label of prostitute. However, as Sueyoshi demonstrates, "Japanese femininity and sexuality often received praise from American whites who saw their own femininity under assault with the rise of the New Woman. Short stories of Japanese women as romantic mates abounded. White women also donned Japanese kimono to heighten their femininity and adopted Japanese decor in their bedroom to enhance their sexuality at home" (n. pag.). Hence, even the domestic Japanese woman was associated primarily with sexuality. With such roots, stereotypes abounded about Asian American women's hypersexuality and sexual availability even into the second half of the twentieth-century.

The experience of American servicemen in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s exacerbated the stereotype of the sexualized Asian woman. In her book *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, Kathleen Barry writes that "prostitution proliferated in Saigon" during the Vietnam-U.S. war (132); and by 1975, there were half a million Vietnamese women in prostitution (135). Most military bases in South Vietnam were surrounded by brothels, and American soldiers were allowed to bring prostitutes into these bases as "local national guests" (Barry 133). Citing the biography of Le Ly Hayslip, entitled *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*

(1993), Barry explains how all Vietnamese women were assumed to be sexually available to American soldiers:

Hayslip's biography reveals the daily struggle against military men who assumed that she and any women who were visible were prostitutes. For the most part, Le Ly Hayslip managed to avoid prostitution, but doing so involved persistent refusals, for whenever she was on the streets she was taken for a prostitute by military men. She recounts many such occurrences that took place when she was on the streets selling merchandise to GIs to support herself and her child. And not only was she assumed to be a prostitute because she was a Vietnamese woman; even her sharp refusals in no way convinced the GIs that she could not be had for a price. (134)

Returning to the United States after military service, American men brought with them these stereotypes about the sexual availability of Asian women. And because the demand for prostitution in Southeast Asia due to military deployment shifted into the sex tourism industry, especially in Thailand and the Philippines, Asian women are still proffered and purchased as sexual commodities, especially to American, European, Australian, and Japanese men, even to this day (Barry 138-39).

Kim himself makes reference to stereotypes of the sexually available Asian woman, even as he uses them to his advantage at times. While giving the narrator a make-over, Kim is careful in his selection of clothing: "'Show some flesh, not too much. Don't want to be mistaken for Miss Saigon,' Kim said sarcastically" (Monji 214).³ The mere sight of Kim and the narrator in their provocative attire is enough to guarantee their access to the clubs: "The club managers, those white men with slick ponytails and overly bright smiles, liked having Kim there. Asian girls were exotic, but humble enough to not cause trouble. We never went to Asian hangouts dressed like this. Kim advised, 'We live two worlds. One, real. Two, white boy fantasy'" (Monji 215). Kim attracts the attention of men by offering a provocative view of a feminized Asian body, but he also falls back upon other stereotypes about Asian women: their shyness and modesty. He uses these traits to reject the sexual advances of the men who want to take this Asian "girl" home for sex. The bouncers capitalize upon the sexual appeal of Asian women even as they expect demure behavior from these two women. That Kim and the narrator never go to Asian clubs so dressed demonstrates the limitation of these ethnic stereotypes. It is when the two white men believe the fantasy to be reality – that these two Asian women are sexually available to them – that Kim and the narrator experience the threat of sexual violation.

³ Kim's reference to "Miss Saigon" and earlier mention of participating in a pageant point readers toward the musical *Miss Saigon*. Should time allow, instructors may wish to probe the connections between this musical; its source *Madama Butterfly*, an opera by Giacomo Puccini; David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly*, another adaptation of Puccini's opera; and Monji's short story. At the very least, it is helpful to identify the musical, its female protagonist named Kim, Kim's participation in a "Miss Saigon" pageant, and the love story between this Vietnamese woman and the American G.I. Chris during the end of the Vietnam-U.S. War.

Elaine H. Kim makes an important observation about Asian American sexuality: “Asian women are only sexual for the same reason that Asian men are asexual: both exist to define the white man’s virility and the white race’s superiority” (70). My previous discussion of the desire of the two white men to rape the narrator and Kim to punish them for their supposedly lesbian identities points to this idea of white male virility being affirmed via the bodies of Asian women. Yet the interconnected concepts of white male virility and superiority are also both tied to the anxiety about Asian male sexuality. Initially, students may believe Kim embodies the stereotype of the asexual Asian male, because they view his cross-dressing as a dilution of masculinity and virility. I challenge this notion by reminding them of the final scene where Kim exposes his genitalia to the would-be rapists. Interestingly, by the end of the story, Kim’s body is more sexually charged than those of the two white men. Rather than being asexual, Kim embodies both female and male sexuality. He appropriates the sexual allure apportioned to Asian women when he cross-dresses – he is the woman “who gets all the looks” at the clubs – and he co-opts the white men’s own sexual aggression when he reveals his penis and its potential to rape the both of them. Indeed, to the white men, Kim’s body is dangerously sexual. We also must not forget that it is Kim who has engaged in heterosexual intercourse during the story, rather than the hyper-masculine white men. Significantly, Monji both confronts and reverses the stereotype about the asexual Asian male through the character of the cross-dressing Kim. In addition, she rescripts the American ideal of masculinity, a transformation even more spectacular in the context of Asian American history and culture.

Returning to the climactic final scene where Kim stops the would-be rapists, we are presented with a new understanding of what a “real man” is that offers Kim’s constant reinvention of self and negotiations of gender identity as superior to traditional American masculinity. Recall the words Kim uses when he sees the two white men from the club about to rape his roommate: “Hey, white boy. You no real man. You don’t know real man when you see one” (Monji 217). Initially, these words appear to refer to his own biology. The men did not realize that Kim is a man and were attracted to him at the club; therefore, their own “manhood,” their masculinity, is questionable, if we follow the stereotypical line of equating masculinity with heterosexuality. Yet the words also present Kim as a “real man,” as opposed to the two white men who are not “real men.” Here we are clearly dealing with an understanding of masculinity and its attendant characteristics, rather than male anatomy. If the white men are not “real men,” then their personality traits cannot be deemed indicative of masculinity. Thus a “real man” is not a rapist; he is not sexually aggressive; he does not treat women as objects. Kim, the “real man,” is considerate, helpful, and protective. Importantly, this “real man” also embraces characteristics typically gendered as female. The end of the story reads: “Kim embraced me in his sinewy arms and fed me from cartons of food, scolding me like a mother bird feeding her chick. ‘Baby-girl, I told you about white men. You believe now? Don’t worry, baby-girl. I no paper dragon. I keep you safe’” (Monji 218). Here we see Kim as a nurturer and mother figure, as well as a protector. The character of Kim reconfigures the category of “real man.” Divorced from biology and rooted in internal qualities, a “real man” combines care and concern with protectiveness and insight. This version of masculinity is still inherently strong – Kim is “no

paper dragon”; that is, all words and no actions – but significantly, he eschews violence. The white men from the club derive their sense of masculinity from their willingness to commit violence. Kim, on the other hand, uses his intellect to disempower these men completely. Violence, we can see, is not an essential characteristic of masculinity. Ultimately, the character of Kim demonstrates the myriad facets of masculinity and the difficulty of gendering any qualities as specifically male or female. As Edwards writes, “Separating gender from biology thus helps make possible the radical reimagining of traditional gender roles that is necessary for the transformation of patriarchal structures” (420). Monji positions Kim as a paragon of American masculinity that challenges such patriarchal and imperial structures as heteronormativity, male and masculine superiority, and white supremacy. In so doing, she challenges the fundamental bases of 1980s and contemporary American culture.

Ultimately, the short story “Kim” opens up new possibilities for understanding gender, sexuality, and ethnic identity in the United States – no small feat for a text of some six pages. By the end of our class discussion, my students are transfixed by this story. A few leave the classroom feeling uneasy or upset, for their established world views about what a man or woman is have been unsettled. But many students are energized and excited by the discussions of sex versus gender, the relationship between gender and sexual identity, and the impact of history and culture upon identity. It is gratifying to see them apply these ideas to subsequent texts or use the new terminology in other courses. Yet perhaps the most fundamental lesson learned by students who read and discuss this story is the transformative power of literature. It does not matter whether a student enjoyed the story or was disturbed by it; she will find herself a new kind of reader and interpreter of texts after experiencing “Kim.” Jana Monji’s short story “Kim” is the rare piece of literature that combines impeccable aesthetics and commanding politics with a multitude of pedagogical opportunities for the college classroom.

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