

**Assisted Suicide: Adoptee Perspectives and *Miss Saigon***  
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**Kim Park Nelson, Ph.D.**

It is a Saturday night in the fall of 1994, long before I have become (or even started to become) a scholar of Asian adoption and a professor of Asian American Studies. I work as a low level cog in a state agency office. I have recently become the owner of a house in South Minneapolis, and being house-poor, I've taken a second job in a restaurant in downtown Minneapolis to earn extra money to fix up my new home. I try not to pay to park downtown, because that eats into my pitiful restaurant earnings, so I ride my bike to work when the weather permits. As a Korean American adoptee in my early twenties, I think of myself not as Asian American, but just as a person, doing my thing, working for my pay, trying to get along. I am weaving my way through crowded streets toward the restaurant, an Asian woman on a bike. A young White man yells to me, grinning invitingly, drunkenly, "Heey Miss Saigon!" *Miss Saigon* is being performed at the Orpheum, just blocks away. I realize I cannot ride a bike in my own city to my own job without being read by random White people as a prostitute.

Almost twenty years and a couple of degrees later, I can say with some authority that I'm not the only adoptee in Minnesota for whom a production of *Miss Saigon* is problematic. Or the only Asian American. I acknowledge that *Miss Saigon* is particularly offensive to Vietnamese Americans whose most painful family memories of war and immigration are exploited as musical entertainment. It is Vietnamese who are forced, in *Miss Saigon* into a White American gaze, and to occupy the stereotypical roles of hooker with a heart of gold (in Kim), devious villain (in the Engineer), and the representation of everything that is wrong with "traditional," "backwards" Vietnam (in the Communist). However, because we live in a racializing society that makes no racial (and often, social or cultural) distinction between Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, Korean, Korean American, Chinese, Chinese American, Hmong, or Hmong American, the depiction of stereotype-based characters such as the Asian prostitute or scheming villain potentially impacts all people of Asian heritage. Being Korean instead of Vietnamese doesn't protect me from the racism perpetuated by *Miss Saigon*.

In *Miss Saigon*, the male Asian characters are antagonists but title character, Kim, is the (tragic) heroine. White audiences love Kim, but it's a paternalistic affection not unlike the fondness American audiences have for the big-hearted Black or Latino "buddies" playing supporting roles to Whites in popular comedies, or for romanticized images of racialized servitude, gratitude, and harmony in advertising icons (a trip to the grocery store is all it takes to visit Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima and the Land o' Lakes Indian) that ease the contemporary conscience. Our past and current history of race-based slavery, genocide, exclusion, and exploitation is a lot easier to swallow if we constantly see images of people of color enjoying and volunteering for the opportunity to "serve" White Americans or "share" their land and resources with them. Kim's appeal to the *Miss Saigon* audience is her "sacrifice" in submission to the superiority of the West and the social authority of the American father of her child, Chris, who can "rescue" the child by bringing her to America.

American superiority through child rescue is a primary theme in the history of Asian adoption to the United States. Though it would be nice to believe that the past sixty years of Asian adoption in America has been about nothing more than family building, adoption has long roots in Cold War conflict, including the Vietnam War. The trope of Americans' superior humanity was serious ideological ammunition the Cold War, and the act of adoption of little Asian war orphaned waifs by White Americans was some of the Cold War's best. The superiority of America as a child receiving country over countries that sent children for adoption is an ideological cornerstone of its international

adoption programs since the Korean War. Inequity between adopting countries and sending countries has gone unquestioned and has become deeply embedded in the practice of adoption: as sending countries gain economic and political power, they limit or end their international adoption programs, and adoption agencies move on, developing relationships in new sending countries that are poorer and less empowered in vulnerable regions around the globe.

### **The Prevalence of the Asian American Prostitute**

The stereotype of Asian woman as prostitute is well worn, but apparently not yet worn out. I have often observed if one were to learn about American society solely by consuming its popular culture, one would think that half of American women were prostitutes (indeed, many female actors have won Oscars in roles for playing prostitutes). This unfortunate learner would also conclude that there were hardly any Asian Americans in American society, and that almost *all* of them were prostitutes. I hardly think it is a coincidence that when produced roles for American and Asian American women are written by straight White men, there is an overrepresentation of prostitutes as female characters. Any critique of American popular culture's general underrepresentation of women and overrepresentation of prostitutes seems to be answered with additional portrayals of *nicer* prostitutes. I have nothing against prostitutes, but it does seem a narrow lens through which to cast (almost) all Asian femininity. While Asian prostitutes certainly exist, most Asian women aren't prostitutes; but it seems that popular culture in the West is only really interested in Asian women if they *are* prostitutes.

In the course of my doctoral research on adult Korean American adoptees, I was particularly disturbed to learn that many of the women in my study had been told as a matter of simple fact while growing up that their Korean mothers were probably prostitutes, or that they themselves would have probably ended up as prostitutes if they had not had the good fortune to be adopted. There is no evidence that South Korea's sex industry has been a major supplier of adoptable children in Korea; had this been the case, the ensuing scandal would have called into question the ethics of the Korean international adoption program, which for decades has been considered largely free of criminality and child trafficking. While the red light districts known as camptowns that cater to American military personnel are real and the source of a host of social, political and human rights problems, they are not the source of adoptees. Among the adoptees who participated in my research, none of those who had found their birth families had learned that prostitution was part of their Korean history. The most likely source for this pervasive myth is not Korea but America; most of my research participants had been told this by a parent or other relative who had no source of reliable information about the role of women in Korean society. I believe that the myth of Asian woman as prostitute is so widespread in American society that it stands as an easy corollary to the birth country portion of Asian adoptees' stories: if everyone knows that most Asian women are prostitutes (so this is what most Asian women do for work), and most people assume that adoptees are given up by poor women, it follows that most Asian adoptees come from prostitute mothers. Despite the absence of truth behind these assumptions, most adoptees have little or no verifiable information about the circumstances surrounding their separation from birth family and entry into the transnational adoption industry, so they are unable to develop counter-narratives that refute the assertion that their origins are bound up with the sex trade.

For Asian adoptee women, the assumption of birth or social connection to prostitution also feeds into the ever-present narrative of the rescued orphan. The idea of rescue is already embedded in adoption inequities assume that sending countries are poor; it follows that receiving countries are rich. This national iniquity is transposed onto adoptees who leave poor countries (and poor families) to live in

rich countries (and rich families).<sup>1</sup> That rescue narrative becomes even more compelling when what adoptees are imagined to have escaped is a life of (strangely titillating, yet ultimately horrific) sexual slavery. Ironically, it is relocation to the U.S. that likely maximizes female Asian adoptees' exposure to racialized sexual objectification. Sexual fetishization of Asian women is common, and most adoptee women I know have been the object of "yellow fever" perpetuated by the Western stereotyping of Asian women as submissive and sexually available.

### **Interracial Relationships as the Way Forward (and the Way Back)**

Asian adoptees have many different responses to sexual objectification of Asian women. Since many adoptees have been teased for their appearance, this so-called positive attention is sometimes a welcome change. Others choose not to date outside their ethnicity or race, or at least not to date Whites. But the majority of Korean adoptees (women and men) form relationships with Whites. While I hope these relationships are not based primarily racial fetishization, in any case, our community is deeply interracial; most Asian adoptees are adopted into White families and reproduce those interracial families when they choose White partners. Of course, one of the major plot points of *Miss Saigon* is the existence of the interracial relationship between its protagonists, the Vietnamese prostitute Kim and the American GI Chris. However, the *Miss Saigon* relationship between Kim and Chris is hardly a model for interracial partnerships. Instead, stereotypes about the nature of interracial relationships are perpetuated and the damage done by *Miss Saigon* is extended to White partners of Asian women. The White man who can't control his desire for Asian women is the flip side of the Asian woman as prostitute stereotype; this stereotype underlines the Asian woman as temptress, but assigns a certain moral ambiguity to the White pursuant of the Asian woman.

Interracial relationships, like any relationship, require the work of growth, compromise, and nurture, but unlike other relationships, interracial relationships also require willingness on the part of both partners to navigate racial stereotypes about the relationship. Chris and Kim's relationship, unlikely though it may be, is at the heart of the plot in *Miss Saigon*, but rather than interrogating these stereotypes, the portrayal of this relationship reinforces them. A "Chris and Kim" relationship is the last thing I would want people to think of when they see me with my White husband. No, I'm not a prostitute. No, he did not buy me from overseas. No, he doesn't only like Asian women. No, I don't walk on his back to give him massages. Yes, I had to figure out if his interest in me was at all racially motivated when we first started dating. Yes, I have dated White men who only dated Asian women or have gone on to only date Asian women (and I'm ashamed of myself, but not as much as they should be of themselves).

While interracial relationships are still unusual in Asia, they are increasingly common and accepted in the United States ([though more so in some racial groups than others](#)). Some people think interracial romantic relationships, like interracial adoptions, are both a sign of progress and an avenue of change in American race relations. After all, these relationships represent "love between races." Interracial partnerships that create opportunities for social and cultural integration among members of different racial groups may indeed contribute to the evolution of race relations in America. However, if the burden of assimilation falls disproportionately on one member of a couple, the result may be social isolation for them and no additional racial integration for their partner. Incidentally, this often is the

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<sup>1</sup>That the United States is both a sending and receiving country confounds this set of assumptions, unless we understand the United States as both poor and rich: rich enough for Whites to adopt people of color, but poor enough to send its own children of color (the African American kids who constitute most of the population of children sent out of the US of adoption) from Black families to White families to still Whiter nations.

experience of transracial adoptees, who are predominantly adopted by White families and live in predominantly White communities with little or no connection to their birth cultures or to others who share their racial identities. Though having a non-White child in a White family may “integrate” that family, many adoptees experience not integration, but the social and racial isolation of assimilation into White society, a product of the racial and national biases within adoptive systems where people of color stay separated from other people of color under the social control of a White majority society. The paradox of interracial family formation as a “cure for racism” is that if transracial adoptive families are created and maintained through global imbalances that favor Whiteness, then these families represent the continuation of, rather than freedom from, historic racial power structures.

### **Suicide and the Death of Asian-ness**

The dramatic climax of *Miss Saigon* is Kim’s suicide, and much of the emotional gravitas of this act comes from her reasons for it. In order for her child to be raised as an American (in other words, rescued), she kills herself in the ultimate act of love. The *Miss Saigon* audience loves Kim because her decision is a tacit validation to the tens of thousands of White adoptive parents who have told their Asian adopted kids that their birth mothers gave them up “...because she loved you so much that she wanted a better life for you.” Like the myth of the Asian prostitute, I’m not exactly sure how this sentiment can be articulated so often and with such certitude. In fact, birth mothers as a group are so oppressed that there is very little accurate public awareness of their stories. Most birth mothers are pressured to relinquish their children by family members or discriminated against in their societies as women and as mothers. But telling your adopted kids that they were given up for adoption because “...your mother wanted you but she was not strong enough to fend off all the people who didn’t want her to keep you,” just doesn’t sound as good.

Like Kim’s character, Asian birth mothers might as well have committed suicide where their children are concerned; for many Asian adoptees, their birth countries and cultures died when they came to the United States, along with any claim birth parents might have. For adoptive parents, this seemingly irrevocable severing of ties to birth families is one of the characteristics that makes international adoption appealing. International adoption surged in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s soon after domestic adoption policy changed to begin protecting the rights of birth mothers and communities of color that were the source of children for domestic adoption. At the same time, stories of American women who faced severe pressure to give up illegitimate children, or who had children removed to prevent them from becoming single mothers during the “Baby Scoop Era,” came to the attention of the American public. As the social stigma around single motherhood weakened, birth mothers secured greater reproductive control for themselves and their children, and Americans started adopting from countries where women had not achieved the same legal rights with respect to their own governments—and where a birth mother would have no rights whatsoever with respect to the U.S. government or the adoptive parents of her children.

That Kim’s ultimate act of so-called heroism is her suicide also exacts a final, bitter blow to Asian Americans, including Asian American adoptees. Kim’s suicide demonstrates the invisibility and lack of belonging endured by Asians and Asian Americans in American society, the first immigrant group excluded from entry and citizenship to the United States, and a group still widely understood as foreigners in the United States despite the long history of Asian America. The romanticized image of Asian American suicide also exacerbates existing suicide crises in Asian American communities around the country. For several years, we have known that Asian American girls and young women are at higher risk of suicide than other groups, but a recent study of adoptees here in Minnesota documents what I have suspected for years as a member of the Asian American adoptee community. The report in

the journal *Pediatrics* [summarized here](#), concludes that adoptees in the study (all living in Minnesota, the majority Korean) were four times more likely than their non-adopted siblings to have made suicide attempts—and the average age of the study group was only 15. Asian suicide as the climax of the racial melodrama of *Miss Saigon* is the final insult added to injury.

### **What's the Harm in *Miss Saigon*?**

My focus has been largely on how *Miss Saigon* is ignorant of or harmful to Asian Americans, including Asian adoptees, but I also argue that *Miss Saigon* is harmful to other identity groups, including its White audiences. Despite legal efforts to outlaw Jim Crow, [redlining](#), and other forms of state-sanctioned segregation, American society has a long way to go towards desegregation. The divides that continue to segregate us are social, economic and cultural. Many of the White college students I teach think that they have no knowledge about race in America because they come from all White communities, but I argue that their experience is a profound example of racial segregation in contemporary America; living in a White-only community is one of the most racializing experiences in our society. Most non-White Americans have “integrated” with White culture; we have no choice if we want to find services, become educated, or hold a job. But the same cannot be said for White Americans with respect to people of color in most parts of the United States. Because we remain such a segregated country, much of the information Americans have about other races comes from representations in popular culture, and this is particularly true for White Americans. Unfortunately, our most popular examples of racial integration come from decidedly White perspectives, where non-White characters are vilified, pitied, or relegated to supporting roles. *Miss Saigon* is one of many White American stories that include non-White characters (as opposed to American stories which include multiple perspectives) as White support. In *Miss Saigon*, the Asian lead goes so far as to sacrifice her own life to maintain White-dominated power structures. Though *Miss Saigon* might seem progressive in that it acknowledges the existence of inter-race relations, it hardly depicts the way forward to racial integration and equality. Instead, it valorizes existing racial and gendered inequities. To the degree that popular culture is instructive about racial matters, the lesson here is that White domination is necessary for interracial harmony. This approach to race in America further separates us racially, and stands in the way of interracial understanding.

While many of those who acknowledge the continued existence of racism in America think it mostly harms people of color, I argue that racism also harms Whites. If the effects of racism for American people of color include persistent gaps in wealth, education, and access to nutrition and health care, what are the effects on Whites? As we have become a society that deems racism to be a social ill, Whites are now understood as its primary perpetrators. And being perceived as a racist is certainly harmful to Whites. Some scramble to present themselves as exceptional (as in “...some of my best friends/children/lovers are Black/Asian/Latino/Indian...”), or try to divert conversation away from any topic related to race. Others express guilt or anguish with the interpersonal and institutional racisms they encounter. I have witnessed many tears on the faces of White colleagues, students, and community members in reaction to scenes of racism, and I have no doubt of the authenticity of their pain. People of color are not the source of this pain, though we are often its focus. In the case of *Miss Saigon*, community activists’ efforts to make plain the racism inherent in the story and production has painfully raised awareness among some White participants. But it is not the protests that are causing the pain, but racist content of the play itself that is harmful to us all. White people might not be able to personally answer for American slavery, or Native American genocide, or Asian Exclusion, or the atrocities of the Vietnam War, but they can fight against the racist legacies of these shared histories still evident in public life, including in our popular culture.

American racism is not a static entity, and it has changed many times in American social history. The racism we have today is not the cross-burning, church bombing racism of former decades, when people of color were excluded from serving on juries, or prevented from becoming citizens. The cultural and institutional racism of today leaves people of color with only false choices and bad options. My “choice” as an Asian American woman in downtown Minneapolis in 1994 was to be seen as a degraded object of sexual desire or to be rendered invisible in a predominantly white society. This is the same “choice” presented to audiences when *Miss Saigon*—the only current Broadway-based musical with significant Asian characters—consigns Asians to stereotyped, negative, or one-dimensional characterizations.

It’s not that I think a run of *Miss Saigon* is going to make life worse; we already live in a society that is almost entirely racially segregated, where White male power majorities are maintained whether or not there are White male demographic majorities, where media representations of Asian Americans are rare (and usually problematic when they do appear), where adoptees and Asian women have high rates of suicide and suicide attempt, and where racial stereotypes prevail and continue to divide us politically, socially, economically, and geographically. This is the status quo that *Miss Saigon* maintains and has represented since its premiere; the continuing popularity of *Miss Saigon*, more than anything else, is an indicator that nothing has changed at all. I’d like to think we could come up with something better, but according to the producers and host theaters of *Miss Saigon*, this is the best they can do.

Kim PARK NELSON is an associate professor of American Multicultural Studies at Minnesota State University at Moorhead. She is a scholar and educator of Korean adoption, Asian American studies, American race relations, and American studies. Her ethnographic research explores the many identities of adult Korean adoptees, as well as the cultural, social, historical, and political significance of sixty years of Korean adoption to the United States. She is currently completing a book, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences and Racial Exceptionalism*, based on her adoption research. She was the three-time lead organizer for the International Symposia on Korean Adoption Studies, which took place in Seoul in 2007, 2010, and 2013.