

Claire Bantilan

M. Villegas

HumCore 1C

June 9, 2014

A Reflection on “*Miss Saigon: The War on Representation*”

Numerous professors during the summer’s first-year orientation program had advertised the Humanities Core Course, stating that it was very challenging but also quite rewarding. I was intrigued by the idea of accessing and assessing a variety of sources, from classic literature to contemporary media. In spite of my eagerness to enroll in the class, one thought still stirred unease in me: that of having to develop my own research project as a first-year student. Ten months ago, such an idea was an impossibility to scoff at.

The Fall and Winter quarters passed quickly, as I was immersed into the Core’s seemingly endless content. At one point, I had almost forgotten completely about the research project that was looming in the distance. It was not until the end of the Spring quarter’s fourth week that reality had hit me, and the disturbance that I had felt before began to slowly creep back. In spite of having gained valuable knowledge from the previous two quarters, I still had very little to no confidence in the project.

My class was given a weekend to fill out a brainstorming sheet, wherein we would list some objects or artifacts we might be interested in. At the same time, we would start delving into the process of research by jotting down some ideas for the analysis. Somehow, that worksheet alone managed to feel like one of the heaviest burdens. I did not know where to begin with my thoughts. When hours of contemplation did not produce results, I decided to distract myself by

exploring my aunt's CD collection for some old music to listen to. Six weeks ago, it was that very collection that opened the door towards a new path of exploration.

From the very top of the shelves lined with disc containers of all sizes and colors, I pulled out a small, reddish-brown case that had a thick layer of dust on it. Wiping off the dust, I saw a picture of a yellow sun, with brush strokes painted over it appearing to resemble some kind of helicopter and the side of a woman's face. It was a curious sight. I looked at the logo above the symbol. *Miss Saigon*.

The name rang out some kind of familiarity. Naturally, I did what any curious individual in the modern day would do, and I searched for the title on Google. Having had past experience working in stage productions, I became very enthusiastic when I read that *Miss Saigon* was a musical. I came across a study guide that had been released as a companion to watching the show, which included the details regarding the show's characters, setting, and some behind the scenes information. Learning that the story of the show was set in the Vietnam War, I realized that I could possibly find a topic related to the course's overall theme of war (Royston). I set out to find a copy of the show's script, and was fortunate enough to find the scanned pages of the production libretto, complete with the music score and stage directions.

Curious as to whether or not there was a recording of the show to watch while following along with the script, I searched various sites. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any copies of a complete version of the original, premiere show, only a documentary of its production process and a few small snippets of certain musical numbers. I continued browsing, and finally found a full recording of the closing show on Broadway that was posted on YouTube. Undeterred by the video's inconstant quality, I persisted in watching, and was subsequently blown away by what I

saw. I had already taken a fondness of the show because of how it was written like one continuous song, as a vast majority of the dialogue is sung. The show was visually and musically appealing, but its political aspects attracted me the most. One very interesting element of the show was that, due to its setting, it called for a racially diverse cast. I was also fascinated by the way the show had included controversial topics such as prostitution, interracial marriage, and even suicide (Royston).

Immediately, I began looking up more information regarding the show's background, and ultimately stumbled upon a website entitled *Don't Buy Miss Saigon*. This particular website caught my attention, as it was advocating a boycott of the show. This site also became the source of the first quote that I included in my video, from David Mura. The moderators of the website had claimed that people should not watch *Miss Saigon* because it supposedly advocated false stereotypes while romanticizing various ideas such as war and human trafficking (Mura). Additionally, the moderators were accepting submissions, wherein supporters of the cause could send in a photo and a brief personal story about why they were against the show.

I spent some time browsing through the photos and stories of the individuals who had sent in their information. While I appreciated their willingness to share their personal experiences and I respected their opinions, I had to say that I disagreed with these people. As someone who had managed to watch the show, I felt that these supporters were misinformed, because most were basing their opposition off of summaries and photos found online. In denying to watch the show, they were hurting the credibility of their arguments, while also denying themselves from the possibility of thinking otherwise. From there, I knew that I wanted to do a close examination of the show and its portrayal of the stereotypes that were being criticized.

Every existing adaptation of *Miss Saigon*, whether at the professional or amateur level, has had different cast members, crew workers, and stage appearances. However, while there may be various distinctions between each performance, the one thing that is consistent and shared between all is the script. Therefore, instead of choosing one specific production or performance to study, I chose to make the script my primary artifact. I began to reread the script while taking copious notes on the story's details. Recalling that most of the show was sung through, I also began listening to the original show's recording as a method of better engaging my study. Amidst being absorbed in the material before me, I considered how I would present my ideas coherently on paper. It was at that moment that the thought of a creative project came into my mind.

Because my artifact of study was a musical stage production, something heavily reliant on imagery, I thought that an analysis paper alone would not do it proper justice. The script alone was my primary source of evidence for my work, but I felt as though there was a missing aspect to it. I wanted to give my audience a chance to see portions of the actual productions and form conclusions based on fair, individual perception, something that some of the supporters of *Don't Buy Miss Saigon* did not have. Thinking about the possible effectiveness of my presentation, I was also further encouraged to make a creative project when I read that 65% of all individuals were inclined to learn in a quicker and more efficient pace with the use of visual aids (Bradford). This fact alone solidified the motivation I had to create a video.

For the first portion of the creation process, I approached my video project very similarly to a normal research paper. After gathering enough notes on my personal observations of *Miss Saigon*, I began searching through the school's online databases to find scholarly articles pertaining to the show. I also collected several reviews and reflections from various journalists

who had seen the productions. Reading through all of the documents, I was able to better develop the ideas that I wanted to expand upon. When the writers argued in defense of the show, I examined how their analyses could enrich my own evaluation. When the writers argued against the show, I sought out ways I could challenge their evaluations while fortifying mine. In short, secondary sources allowed for me to discover the strengths and weaknesses of my work.

While other students created rough drafts of their essays, I submitted a proposed outline of what I wanted to include in my video. The outline became a thorough guide that I would follow in writing out a basic script to record. The feedback that I received from my section leader allowed for me to further refine the concepts that I wished to include, and I narrowed down the outline and script to the most concise for I could manage. Once I had completed the fundamental blueprint for my video, I went straight into creating the actual product.

The second part of my creative process for this project was not simple, but I had never anticipated it to be so in the first place. I knew that a visual presentation would not be easy because of the difficulty in finding a recording of a full performance. I would have to resort to using snippets of various productions, which would be confusing from the aforementioned inconsistencies between them. In the hopes of lessening the confusion amongst these clips, I decided to utilize only the videos that involved the original West End and Broadway casts. A positive aspect of this was that two of the principal characters, Kim and the Engineer, were played by the same actress and actor in both opening versions, Lea Salonga and Jonathan Pryce respectively. If I could include enough clips with the two in character, I could some continuity.

It took a solid day to gather enough video clips to begin working on the actual product. I spent two days in total recording my voice for the narration, using headphones that had a built-in

microphone in order to assure the best possible quality of sound. Attempting to multitask and record while organizing the clips, I spent approximately three days producing a rough cut of my video; this draft was then presented to my section leaders and my fellow classmates. Through conversing with my peers and attending conferences with my section leader, I was able to receive feedback on how to improve my project. Taking notes on the suggestions I was given, I spent another three days recording more dialogue, searching for more video clips to add, and re-editing portions of the existing project. Altogether, the creation of the video took a solid week in order to create a final version of my video.

I chose to start my presentation with some background for *Miss Saigon*, as I understood that not everyone would be familiar with theatre work, especially not a show that is complex and over twenty-five years old (Royston). I was fortunate enough to find a copy of *The Heat Is On*, the documentary created to showcase the production of the original West End show. I pulled quite a bit of information about the show's background from this documentary, and it also included some performance clips that proved to be invaluable. After establishing the introduction to the musical, I presented my argument by referencing Mura, who argued against the show's stereotypes, and then including a portion of a quote from journalist Robert Stone, who defended the show's peculiarities. Through including the quotes, I hoped to give the feeling that the audience was beginning to delve into a deep analysis of the show.

After the establishment of my research artifact and topic, I moved directly into evidence, and planned out a basic chain of examination. Starting at the show's opening number was an effective way of easing the viewers into the bulk of my project. I began where the show itself began, and studied the prostitutes that were introduced first. Showing their subtle humanity

allowed for me to progress towards the show's protagonist, Kim, who was a prostitute herself. Considering that most of the script focuses on her, I also chose to spend more time showcasing her characteristics, from her backstory to her ultimate demise. I was initially unsure of how to tackle the story of Kim's suicide, but I decided to acknowledge that it was controversial, but its scandalousness also gave it some realism. Neither I nor the show explicitly condones the act of self-harm, but such antagonism does not mean that it does not exist in the real world.

After finishing Kim's story, I contrasted her life with the lives of the American soldiers who were present in the show. Similar to the prostitutes and Kim, I focused on the collective group of soldiers first, in order to establish a general theme. In this case, the soldiers were not as heroic as the typical stereotype of servicemen and servicewomen states. When this idea was prominently displayed, I then shifted to briefly mention two of the soldiers who visibly demonstrated their weaknesses, John and Chris, in order to really give faces to this concept, much like I did in mentioning the prostitute Gigi earlier. Tying up my position that the soldiers' imperfections actually challenged the concepts of white supremacy, I introduced the character that I saw was the full embodiment of this dispute: the Engineer.

The Engineer is a fascinating character because of his Eurasian background and his flamboyant personality act. I had read that there was controversy in the casting of the Engineer in the original productions, but I did not mention them because I felt as though the casting issue did not have much relevancy in my analysis of the script (Henry). Instead, I focused on the Engineer's characteristic contradictions, and how he was the epitome of one of the show's effects on its audience members. He felt like such an artificial character because of how outrageous his dialogue was, but at the same time, he was also very lifelike in his actions. Watching the

Engineer was confusing, but it also forced viewers to really contemplate about his existence and purpose, which would also allow for a reflection of the entire production.

Once I completed my observations of the Engineer, I felt as though it was time to wrap up my work. I included a reflection of writer Celine Shimizu in the hopes of confirming my ideas of the show's value in provoking contemplation. In order to make that position clearer, I also offered an example by essentially stating that different viewers can benefit from *Miss Saigon* in different ways because of how complex and diverse the show is. Wrapping up the final pieces of my argument, I then worked to end on a positive note by promoting how stereotypes are difficult to eliminate, but the show demonstrates that such an action can be done with good efforts.

Watching my finished product before submission, I realize now that the video feels very much like a fully written paper with the added feature of a visual component. It follows the standard introduction-analysis-conclusion motion, but it is graphically exhibited.

The video was, by far, the most difficult piece of work that I have ever encountered in my school career. The reason behind this is because I had to somehow combine the process of the research project together with the idea of a visual presentation. I knew that somehow, I had to find a balance between showing my audience my argument and demonstrating the validity of my claims. What felt so special about this project was that I was not only able to practice my research and analytic development, but I was also able to explore another form of learning through artistry. Somehow, I felt as though I was actually able to immerse myself in my topic, and so I became considerably passionate about it. It is my desire to be able to convey that passion, and for the viewers of my work to also experience that immersion. At the end of the day, this project was a struggle, but one that I am immensely proud of.

Works Cited

- Bradford, William C. "Reaching the Visual Learner: Teaching Property Through Art." *The Law Teacher* 11. (2004): 1-5. Academic Search Complete. Web. 10 May 2014.
- Henry III, William. "Memories Of A World On Fire." *Time* 137.16 (1991): 91. Academic Search Complete. Web. 14 May 2014.
- Mura, David. "The Problem(s) With Miss Saigon (or, How Many Stereotypes Can You Cram into One Broadway Musical)." *Opine Season*. Opine Season, 11 Sept. 2013. Web. 31 May 2014.
- Royston, Peter, and Sarah Schlesinger. *The Music Theatre International Study Guide for Miss Saigon*. New York, NY: Music Theatre International, 1990. Print.
- * Schönberg, Claude-Michel, and Alain Boulbil. *Miss Saigon*. Milwaukee, WI.: Hal Leonard Pub., 1987. Print.
- * Artifact
- Schönberg, Claude-Michel. *Miss Saigon (Original London Cast)*. Original London Cast. Decca, 1990. CD.
- Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. "The Bind Of Representation: Performing And Consuming Hypersexuality In *Miss Saigon*." *Theatre Journal* 57.2 (2005): 247-265. Academic Search Complete. Web. 10 May 2014.
- Stone, Robert. "*Miss Saigon* Flirts With Art And Reality." *New York Times* 140.48563 (1991): 1. Academic Search Complete. Web. 10 May 2014.
- The Heat Is On*. Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Thames Television, 1989. TV Movie.