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Racial Representation and Miss Saigon: A Zero Sum Game?

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Racial Representation and *Miss Saigon*: A Zero Sum Game?

Isabel (Izzy) P. S. Ryde

Abstract

People have been protesting and supporting the musical *Miss Saigon* since its premiere in 1989. The musical tale of a white American GI falling in love with a Vietnamese bargirl during the Vietnam War is praised for its diverse cast and showing the Vietnamese side of the war. *Miss Saigon* is also criticized for its stereotypical depiction of Asian women as prostitutes and Asian men as cold and treacherous. Both sides are passionate, and there is no clear consensus or majority opinion. What, then, is the value of *Miss Saigon*? Should it be banned or still performed? I analyze the different positions of the protesters, and compare their opinions to *Miss Saigon* supporters. The debate reaches beyond *Miss Saigon* to comment on what quality representation in media means and whether quality representation for one group is outweighed by controversial representation of another. Ultimately, I decide that the show is still worth performing if the actors and production team are willing to contend with the issues of race and representation raised by the protesters.

Keywords

musical theater, *Miss Saigon*, Broadway, Minnesota theater, race, Asian-American protest, Asian representation in media

PART 1: THE BACKGROUND

How in the world did they manage to get a helicopter in there? I wonder quietly as the blades whir above the palm trees in the wind. A flimsy rope ladder dangles down from the helicopter as people claw upwards for it. A few lucky hands grab it, but a chain link fence blocks off many more. Their cries blend in with music in the background. This isn't a war zone. It's a theatrical recreation of one, complete with a working rescue helicopter. It's the seminal helicopter scene in the world-famous musical retelling of the Vietnam War-- *Miss Saigon*.

Miss Saigon is many things to many people. It's a musical play about a white American soldier and a Vietnamese bargirl who fall in love during the Vietnamese War in 1975. It's the twelfth-longest running Broadway show of all time, at 4,092 performances (Musical Theater International). It features a technically and musically stunning book that calls for a predominantly Asian cast. It's Orientalism and racial stereotypes, if Orientalism and racial stereotypes were set to music onstage and praised. It is beloved throughout the world and has been translated into 12 different languages

(Musical Theater International). It's an affront to the dignity of Asian-Americans everywhere. Is it worthwhile to keep performing the show? Is it a racist, colonialist tool because it was written by white men and shows Orientalist stereotypes? Is it an excellent opportunity for Asian actors to show their craft and portray an underrepresented story? What is the value of *Miss Saigon*?

I will use the musical *Miss Saigon* as a case study to evaluate for whether representation is a zero sum game. Is it worth representing one group well if you are also representing a different group poorly? *Miss Saigon* has attracted both praise (for its centering of the Vietnamese side of the Vietnam War and majority Asian cast) and scrutiny (for yellowface casting and its stereotypical portrayal of Asians, especially Asian women) for how it represents Asian people. I will focus on the controversy over casting the role of the French-Vietnamese Engineer; protests over 3 separate productions of *Miss Saigon* at the Ordway Theater; and the opinions of both protesters and supporters.

My identities do not neatly intersect with the debate about *Miss Saigon*, as I am not Asian or Asian-American. My goal is to use the words and opinions that have already been communicated by people who are closer to the issue, and put protesters and supporters' ideas in conversation with each other. The American Studies discipline's focus on examining the unflattering and contentious aspects of American history, like protests around a popular musical,

provides inspiration for my paper. Analyzing cultural events through the lens of identity, particularly race, grounds my admittedly niche topic of racial representation musical theater in the American Studies discipline.

To ground my paper and explain why I am studying *Miss Saigon*, I will explain my positionality. I am a cisgender white woman, born in 1997, who has loved musical theater for as long as I can remember. My upper-middle-class, suburban upbringing in Massachusetts gave me resources to nurture this love. I got to see live professional performances, borrow musical films from our well-stocked local library, and participate in shows at my middle and high school. But while I love this art form, I understand its history of perpetuating racism, xenophobia, and sexism onstage. I am a loving but critical musical theater fan. For example, I can appreciate Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's music and the elaborate dance sequences in *West Side Story* while also critiquing the thick accents and violence of the Puerto Rican characters. My favorite shows are ones that show and criticize history such as *Evita* and *Hamilton*.

Compared to other musicals, I also have a family connection to *Miss Saigon*. My younger brother is adopted from South Korea. Like Tam in *Miss Saigon*, his birth parents came from very different backgrounds. Like Kim in *Miss Saigon*, my brother's birth mother gave him up in the hopes that he could live a better life, even if that "better life" was a life without

her. In contrast to some *Miss Saigon* protesters, I understand the realities of having an Asian-white mixed family in America, because I have lived it. Just because I love my brother dearly does not mean I uncritically support the policies and practices of adoption. The same adoption practices that gave me my brother can also perpetuate human trafficking, corruption, and the shaming of single mothers. My experience in thinking about families that transcend borders through the lens of adoption provides a helpful frame to think about for *Miss Saigon*.

Beyond this personal and familial connection, why is it important to look at *Miss Saigon*? Not many people watch musicals compared to the number that watch TV shows or movies, after all. Despite these small numbers, musical theaters' fan base is extremely devoted. Theater fans develop a deep connection to the emotions of loveable but flawed characters onstage. Musical characters often talk and sing about their motives directly to the audience, making it much easier for audiences to understand why characters act as they do. This human connection helps theater fans identify with characters from very different backgrounds, times, or places.

Many popular musicals, including recent smash hit *Hamilton*, are set in the past. Whether a realistic version of the past (like New York City gang violence in the 1950s seen in *West Side Story*) or a revisionist version (like black actors rapping as the Founding Fathers in

Hamilton), historical settings provide fans an escape to a different world. It is nearly impossible to overstate how far musical theater transports its fans once they focus on the story and not the actual theater. Although many theater fans are women or LGBTQIA+, they also tend to be wealthier and white. While white audiences want to see diverse stories and histories onstage, they typically don't want critical stories. Because of musical theater's cyclical nature, fans can watch different versions the same show for decades in movies, revivals, and even high school productions if a show is popular enough. Once a show enters the musical theater canon after success on Broadway or the West End, it's very challenging to remove it even if it's very offensive. The representation of groups portrayed in musicals through characters, songs, and sets is key to how people perceive that group for years or even decades after.

Why does representation in musical theater, and media more broadly, matter so much? Representation is often expressed using the phrase "You can't be what you can't see." Latina actress Eva Longoria gave concrete examples of why representation matters in an article for Time magazine. She noted that the number of girls interested in archery skyrocketed in 2012 after the release of *The Hunger Games* and *Brave*, two movies with bow-and-arrow wielding heroines. Longoria also notes that the crime drama *CSI* has led to a dramatic increase in students in forensic studies classes (Longoria). When people see people who

look like them who are likeable, intelligent, resilient, or heroic, it makes people feel more optimistic about their future. Seeing people like you succeed (even if they are fictional characters) makes it easier to see yourself succeeding. Understandably, many Vietnamese-Americans don't want *Miss Saigon* to represent the idea that their daughters should become prostitutes. But others see *Miss Saigon* as giving depth and humanity to Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American people during the Vietnam War, and also showing how protagonist Kim becomes outspoken and strong.

At the same time, for groups that are not often represented in media, the quality of the representation matters. Vietnamese-American writer Steven Nguyen Scaife explains that:

Decades of representation that's either trivializing or nonexistent have made many groups protective of their image. Nobody wants Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles* or Apu from *The Simpsons* to be the definitive cultural touchstone for their background, and yet it's painfully apparent that with so little representation, *any* representation easily becomes the *definitive* representation. (Nguyen Scaife, emphasis his)

This lens of representation, and having your group represented compassionately and accurately, is central to the debate over *Miss Saigon*. The controversy

wouldn't exist if *Miss Saigon* was only one of many popular stories about Vietnamese people. But because *Miss Saigon* is the only interaction many non-Vietnamese people will have with Vietnamese culture, what the show portrays directly affects Vietnamese people. Asian-Americans are stereotyped as all being the same, despite different heritages, cultures, histories and national background (Moua). Because of this depiction of one group (in this case, Vietnamese people) affects other Asian-Americans even if they are not Vietnamese.

For this paper, I will use the term "Asian American" for Americans with Asian heritage, and the term "Asian" to refer more broadly to anyone with Asian heritage, including Asian-Americans. Much like the show itself, the people involved in supporting and protesting *Miss Saigon* come from a number of backgrounds, many of whom are Asian and/or Asian American. For example, actor Kwang-ho Hong (who played Thuy in the 2014 revival) is South Korean and lives in South Korea, so he can be called Asian. Actor Jon Jon Briones, who played the Engineer in the revival, identifies as Filipino-American because he is Filipino and lives in America, and identifies more broadly as Asian-American. Briones is both Asian and Asian-American, while Hong is Asian but not Asian-American. Asians and Asian-Americans are not the same and do not have the same life experience, politics, racial views, or any other cultural practice. Similarities between Asians and Asian-Americans, if

and when they exist, come from their specific ethnic background (for example, Vietnamese people and Vietnamese-Americans sharing aspects of Vietnamese culture) and being seen as racially Asian (which means different things in different countries, including the United States).

PART 2: HISTORY AND CONTROVERSY

The story of *Miss Saigon* begins with another musical-- *Les Misérables*. White French composer Claude-Michel Schönberg was working on a French score for *Les Misérables* in 1988 when he opened a magazine and saw a striking picture. The picture showed a Vietnamese daughter at the airport with her mother. The girl's father was an American GI, and her mother wanted to send the girl to the US for a better future than in postwar Vietnam. As Schönberg notes, this was the same sacrifice that Cio-Cio San made in *Madam Butterfly*, where Cio-Cio San dies of suicide to make her American lover take their son. Schönberg contacted white French lyricist Alain Boubil, and they got to work reimagining *Madam Butterfly*, but in Vietnam in the 1970s. Boubil declared that while brainstorming the show, "We got quickly to the idea that the misunderstanding between two people reflected the misunderstanding between two countries" (Paulson). White British producer Cameron Mackintosh, who had produced smash hit *Les Misérables*, got in touch with Schönberg and Boubil about what became *Miss Saigon*. The show

opened in 1989 with Jonathan Pryce as the Engineer and Lea Salonga as Kim on the West End in London.

Miss Saigon opens with 17-year-old protagonist Kim watching her village getting bombed by Americans in 1975 during the Vietnam War. She flees to Saigon and meets the Engineer, who offers her a job at his brothel servicing American soldiers. An American GI, John, decides to buy Kim's sexual services for his friend Chris. Chris and Kim dance, have sex, fall in love with each other, and get married in a traditional Vietnamese ceremony. Thuy, Kim's cousin and her arranged husband, reappears and discovers Kim. Kim refuses to marry Thuy because she is in love with Chris, and Thuy storms out. Three years pass, and the Viet Cong have taken over and reunified Vietnam. Thuy finds Kim again and discovers that she and Chris had a son named Tam. Thuy tries to kill Tam due to his mixed-race background, but Kim fights Thuy off and shoots him dead.

In Act 2, ex-GI John returns to the US starts a foundation dedicated to finding and helping *bui doi* (children with American fathers and Vietnamese mothers). Through his foundation, John discovers that Kim has had a son and moved to Bangkok. Chris and his American wife Ellen (who Chris married after returning to the US) travel to find Kim and Tam. Kim is working at the Engineers' new brothel, and finds out that Chris had never mentioned her existence to Ellen. Kim urges Chris and Ellen to take Tam to America with them, where

he can escape the postwar chaos and have a long life. Chris and Ellen insist that they can't take Tam away from his mother. Kim shoots herself dead to ensure that Chris will take Tam. Chris finds her body as she lies dying.

Rare for a musical show, protests against *Miss Saigon* began almost immediately after its premiere in 1989. Most of the controversy circled around Jonathan Pryce, a white British actor who played the Engineer in the original 1989 London production. The character of the Engineer (whose given name is Tranh Van Dinh) is French-Vietnamese, and his mixed background is a central to the character's development. The Engineer mentions throughout the show that he wants to be American, and he calls himself "the Engineer" instead of his Vietnamese name. But the production team went beyond the risky choice of having a white man play a Eurasian role. Makeup designers chose to give Pryce prosthetics to alter the shape of his eyes into an epicanthic fold and added a yellow-tan hue to his skin in order to make Pryce look "more Asian". This blatant example of yellowface enraged Asian-Britons who saw the show in London, particularly because an part-Asian role was going to a white man.

The controversy over yellowface is not hard to understand. Asians are criminally underrepresented in all forms of media, but musical theater especially. A study of Broadway diversity in 2018 found that over the previous 10 years, 76% of Broadway roles went to white

actors, 15% to black actors, and just 4% to Asian actors (Fuchs). Jon Jon Briones, a Filipino-American actor currently playing the Engineer on Broadway, said that in the Philippines in the 1970s, "we were used to yellowface, and how white actors play Asian roles, because we watched Hollywood movies all the time. We thought that was a normal thing" (Paulson). David Mura, a Japanese-American academic who led protests against *Miss Saigon* in Minneapolis, recalled the Charlie Chan movies of his childhood to explain why representation matters to him. Charlie Chan, a Chinese-American detective, was played by a white actor in yellowface, while his Chinese-American sidekick Lee was played by an Asian-American actor. Charlie Chan was the hero and got to solve the case and dispense wisdom, while Lee was a bumbling sidekick. To a young Mura (and many others), this reinforced the fact that the white guy would always be the hero, and the Asian always the sidekick, even in a story centered on Asians.

Mura also notes the infamous yellowface role in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, where white actor Mickey Rooney plays a bucktoothed Japanese photographer named Mr. Yunioshi who constantly yells in pidgin English to Audrey Hepburn and sexually harasses her. Rooney's role perpetuate stereotypes of Asians as being evil, unable to speak English, and creepily desiring white women. In his view, the yellowface actors in *Miss Saigon* perpetuate a new set of stereotypes,

including Asian women as prostitutes and Asian men as being evil and undesirable even to Asian women. *Miss Saigon* didn't help these stereotypes because the original production had not one, but two lead roles played by white actors in yellowface. The actor playing Thuy, Kim's cousin and arranged husband, was also a white man in yellowface prosthetics. At the same time, the ensemble was almost all Asian from a number of different Asian countries, so there certainly wasn't a dearth of talented Asian actors to play the lead Asian roles in *Miss Saigon*.

In 1990, the production was set to move from London to New York. Asian-American actor BD Wong and Tony-winning playwright David Henry Hwang wrote to the Actors' Equity Association (known as Equity) in anticipation of the transatlantic move. The Equity union had to approve Pryce's visa (and the visas of all other non-American actors) before the show came to the U.S. Wong and Hwang wanted to keep Pryce from continuing to play the Engineer in yellowface, and hoped that blocking the visa would mean an Asian-American actor would be cast to play the role (Paulson). In an unprecedented decision, the Actor's Equity Union sided with the Asian-American actors and chose to deny Pryce's visa. Aside from the racial justice bent of this decision, Pryce had won international acclaim for his portrayal of the Engineer in London, including the prestigious Olivier Award. After the Equity decision, producer Cameron Mackintosh decided it wasn't worth

relocating the show without one of its stars, and cancelled the move to New York. Still, the controversy continued. Equity's membership was split over the decision, because many members didn't see the concern with an actor changing themselves (or their bodies) for a role. Pressure from high places (including David Dinkins, the mayor of New York City) to mount the show piled in. Equity ended up rescinding the decision just a few days later, and agreed to let the production, with Pryce, move to New York (Paulson). Wong, Hwang, and other Asian-American Equity members were heartbroken.

Even though they didn't get the decision they were hoping for, the Equity protesters had won. By 1991, when the show finally reached New York over a year later, Pryce had stopped using the yellowface prosthetics. In every professional production since, the Engineer has been played by an Asian actor. This is somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory. The Engineer is a brutal pimp and an opportunist-- hardly a positive depiction of a Vietnamese character. It's nonetheless a humorous and complex part to play, and one of the largest parts for Asians, particularly Asian men, on Broadway.

The protests over *Miss Saigon* don't end there, however. The most famous protests after the original production left Broadway in 1994 all took place in Minnesota. The Orpheum Theater in Minneapolis faced protests when it hosted the *Miss Saigon* touring production in

1994. In 1999, the Ordway Theater in Minneapolis mounted a production, which faced many of the same protests. Asian-Americans gathered in a park and demanded that the Ordway never present the show again because of how offensive it was. Some protesters even accepted free tickets from the theater and screamed to interrupt the first act of the show (Quill). Finally, in 2013, the protests reached a head when the Ordway put on *Miss Saigon* for the third time. The 200 protesters gathered in Rice Park for chanting, dancing, and reciting poetry (Combs). Juliana Hu Pegues, a Chinese-American academic who had attended all three protests, wondered why Minnesota was the locus of these protests, given that Minnesota has over 30,000 Asian adoptees. In her words, “It’s really unfortunate that you want to love us and cry over us as children but don’t want to listen to our concerns as adults” (Combs). After 3 grueling rounds of protests, the head of the Ordway, Patricia Mitchell, declared in 2014 that she would never produce *Miss Saigon* during her term. However, she also announced that she was resigning in 6 months, which undermined the Ordway’s commitment to not doing the show (Ringham). As of 2018, no theater in the Twin Cities area has performed *Miss Saigon* since the 2013 protests. In addition, although there have been dozens of regional productions and the 2014 Broadway revival, there has been no large-scale protesting since the 2013 Ordway protests.

PART 3: VOICES AGAINST *MISS SAIGON*

It seems like everyone involved in theater, from theater presidents to actors to theater fans to protesters, has a strong opinion on *Miss Saigon*. A quick Google search for “miss saigon controversy” will show hundreds of responses in favor of and against continuing to perform the show. The protesters are diverse and represent different viewpoints. However, a common theme throughout the protests is that the Asian characters are negative stereotypes, and the show reinforces old Orientalist fantasies and offensive tropes. (Orientalism is non-Asians seeing Asian cultures as all the same, exotic, and starkly different from white American culture-- the creation of an “Asian Other.” Media about Asian people written by white people often falls into the Orientalist trap). Protesters have seen media depicting the submissive Asian prostitute who dreams of a white man and a life far away from Asia, along with the Asian man as a soldier who wants to control women and sneakily tries to get what he wants, many times before in unsympathetic portrayals of Asians and Asian-Americans. These protesters see the same narrative in *Miss Saigon*.

David Mura, a Japanese-American academic, led the protests against *Miss Saigon* in Minnesota. He titles his blog post about the show, “The Problem(s) With *Miss Saigon* (or, how many stereotypes can you cram into one Broadway musical).” He takes issue with the show’s romanticizing of prostitution

and human trafficking, stereotypes of Asian women as prostitutes, the negative portrayals of the two leading Vietnamese men, and Kim dying of suicide to send Tam to live with Chris and Ellen in America. Mura wraps all of these issues together by asserting that racism creates “a moral code where the questionable actions of one race are somehow justified but where any similar action by someone of another race are seen as morally questionable and an indication of that person’s moral reprehensibility” (Mura). He uses the example of if a 17-year-old white Minnesotan girl was forced into prostitution, was bought by a foreign soldier from Sudan, and claimed that she had fallen in love with him within one night. He asks, “Would they [white Minnesotans] look at this so-called love as romantic and tragically doomed? Or would they label it for what it is—the sexual, psychological and economic exploitation of a minor?” (Mura). In his view, white people see it as natural that an Asian woman would love a white man, even if that white man is buying her as a prostitute. On the other hand, if a Sudanese soldier bought a white prostitute and the white girl fell in love, white people would see it as unnatural, harmful, and immoral. Due to racism, the moral code of white America justifies an Asian bargirl falling in love with a white john (because Asian women must want to be white and have a white husband), but questions a white bargirl falling in love with a john who is a soldier of color.

How do Vietnamese people feel about their fictional bargirl counterparts onstage in *Miss Saigon*? Diep Tran, a Vietnamese-American woman from Southern California, wrote an article called “I am Miss Saigon, and I hate it.” In her article, she says that she and her two Vietnamese friends who saw the show together did not recognize themselves in the characters. “Instead, all we could see were desperate, pathetic victims—people who were completely different from the resilient, courageous, multifaceted men and women of Little Saigon [in Orange County, California] ” (Tran). Tran goes on to describe how Kim sings about her desire for a man to save her and says nothing when the Engineer hits and harasses her. In contrast to the strong Vietnamese women in Tran’s family, Kim is weak, submissive, and eager to please. Tran is also incredulous about the white audience members around her who cried when Kim killed herself in order to send her son to live with Chris in America. In her words about the white audience members, “What have they learned, really? That Vietnamese women are victims, Vietnamese men are villains, and Americans are well-meaning buffoons. Perhaps if I were being generous with *Miss Saigon*, I could read it as a cautionary tale for Asian people: Don’t depend on whiteness; it will kill you” (Tran).

Tran notes in her op-ed that Vietnamese-Americans are the sixth-largest Asian group in the United States, with a population over 1.3 million. Why then, she asked, are there no

Vietnamese actors in the show? (Although some productions included Vietnamese actors, the Vietnamese roles are overwhelmingly played by actors of Filipino descent. I will explain why in Part 5). While hundreds of Asian-Americans have weighed in online about *Miss Saigon*, very few Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American people have. (In all my research, I only found 2 opinions by 2 Vietnamese-Americans, one of whom was Tran quoted above). Most of the *Miss Saigon* protestors were Japanese, Chinese, or Hmong American. Mai Neng Moua, one of the Hmong-American organizers, described her involvement this way- “I am Hmong, not Vietnamese, so why do I care? Unfortunately, people can’t tell the difference. They’ve mistaken me for Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean and Japanese. Kim, the Vietnamese prostitute, is me. I am her” (Moua). It seems odd that the group who should be most affected by this show (Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans) are not nearly as vocal about it, both online and in protests, as other Asian ethnicities.

These protestors also debate the fact that *Miss Saigon* is providing much-needed roles for Asian actors in theater. In response to Asian-American actors performing in *Miss Saigon*, Mura explained, “I do understand that, since I have a number of friends who are Asian-American actors — your roles are limited, and certainly leading roles in Broadway musicals for Asian Americans are limited. But as an Asian-American

actress friend who was talking to one of the interviewers said, ‘You’re a writer. Do you write pornography just so you can make money?’” (Mura). While roles for Asians are limited, the protestors believe that it is more important to stick to their values rather than perpetuate stereotypes onstage for money. Frank Chin sums up the protestors’ view succinctly-- “*Miss Saigon* was a racist musical and Asian American actors were fighting to portray stereotypes” (Chung 80).

In summary, protestors take issue with a show written by white people that perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes that actively harm their communities. Over the years, the protestors have not succeeded in their goal of getting people to boycott *Miss Saigon*. They have had smaller victories, in the Ordway banning the show (for a while, at least), bringing racial representation to the mainstream, and banning yellowface and non-white actors playing the Engineer. Their goal of banning the show has not yet happened.

PART 4: VOICES FOR *MISS SAIGON*

Many people have issues with *Miss Saigon*. Still, you can’t have a controversy when only one side is paying attention. *Miss Saigon* has supporters in high places, including Asian actors, theatergoers, and even the mayor of New York City. This section is focused on people who advocate for the show.

Miss Saigon protestors focus on the stereotypical portrayal of Asians in the show. All the Asian women in *Miss Saigon* are prostitutes (including Kim), while the

Asian male leads (the Engineer and Thuy) are treacherous and tricky. Supporters do not argue that this happens in the show. Where the controversy comes into play is whether the presentation and development of these fictional characters is discriminatory toward Asians, and whether Kim is a weak character and dependent on her white lover or not.

Supporters of the show agree that the characters of Thuy and the Engineer are not positive portrayals. The Engineer is a conniving pimp, while Thuy attempts to murder both Kim and Tam after Kim refuses to marry him. Supporters argue that this plot is reasonable and not racist, because some Vietnamese people were the enemies of bargirls and mixed-race children during the war. Thuy Smith is a blogger who describes herself as “Vietnamese–Amerasian” because she has a white American father and a Vietnamese mother. Though she does not refer to herself as a *bui doi*, she would be considered a *bui doi* back in Vietnam due to her mixed heritage. Smith’s story is the real-life counterpart to Kim and Tam. Smith’s Vietnamese mother gave her up and sent her to live with her father in America, just like Kim sends Tam to live with Chris and Ellen. In her view, those that argue that this is reinforcing the stereotype that life in America is better than Asia are denying the fact that this transnational movement actually happened to her (Smith). Many thousands of children also made this transnational movement, including my own brother.

David Mura said that if the reverse love story was true in *Miss Saigon*, if a white girl fell in love with a soldier from Sudan who bought her as a prostitute, we would see it not as “tragic love” but as exploitation of a minor. Thuy Smith disagrees. “Do the critics not believe it is possible that a genuine loving relationship could ever develop between a soldier and a woman who happens to be a prostitute or bar girl? I know of several situations where that has been the case, and quite a few American Vets who are trying to find those former girlfriends to this day” (Smith). Smith also rejects the idea that depicting Asian prostitutes is bad representation, writing that critics who fight against the prostitution in *Miss Saigon* are inadvertently shaming the real-life women who “found themselves in an unfortunate situation of having to do whatever they could to survive” (Smith).

Erin Quill, a Chinese–Welsh–American musical theater actress, takes a break from her admitted “snarky” tone to speak about kindness as it relates to the “Asian American Arts Community.” She argues that no one has to attend a show, but those who “vote[d] in the only way that counts in theater” by buying a ticket deserve to attend a show without interruption. Her piece is best read in its entirety because she responds to the protesters with humor and sarcasm. Here, she talks about protests about the portrayal of prostitutes in *Miss Saigon*:

I mean, if you are going to protest based on the perception that the

show in question portrays women in a negative light, you can feel free to do that, but picking just ONE show to protest based on women's issues is...you know, discriminatory.

What are you saying? Asian prostitutes in a show are 'bad', but you have no opinion on Caucasian Prostitutes or Latin Prostitutes or African American Prostitutes? (Quill)

Quill goes on to discuss a number of musicals that include female criminals or sex workers, including *Rent*, *Lés Miserables*, *Oklahoma*, and *Chicago*. (Mimi, the sex worker in *Rent*, is a Latinx woman of color, and no one has protests her character's depiction). In response to protesters that are saying that they are protesting the perception of Asian women as prostitutes, she names a number of Asian actresses on TV who are not playing prostitutes. "Well of course that list could be LONGER, don't we all wish it was, but ya know....*none of them are playing hookers*. So the perception 'issue' is **not really** a issue, given that more people watch television in America than go to the theater" (Quill, emphasis hers). Finally, about the issue David Mura mentioned about not taking roles that are offensive to Asian and Asian American actors, she had one thing to say-- "We do not stand over your shoulder at your job and tell you that you cannot do it, merely because it is our

opinion that it should not be done" (Quill).

Indeed, the most vocal group of people supporting the show, even more than the expected white theatergoers, has been Asian and Asian-American actors in the show. Orville Mendoza, who played the Engineer in the 2013 national tour that faced protests at the Ordway, gives a moving perspective of how his life led him to *Miss Saigon*, and what *Miss Saigon* has meant to him. Mendoza notes that as a Filipino-American immigrant (he came to the US at age 2), he has experienced racism and his family has experienced racism in America as well. He gives this background because the protesters do not view him and his fellow actors as real people with real lives and real opinions. While admitting that the show "is not to everyone's taste," Mendoza recalls when "those Vietnamese immigrants and servicemen who lived the war and actually came to see the show expressed sincere gratitude that a version of what they experienced was being presented on stage. Instead of being hurtful, they felt it was cathartic" (Mendoza). He insists that the idea of only Asians telling Asian stories would have prevented him from playing Russian, British, or Italian characters, or any character that wasn't Asian. He ends with this open-ended statement-- "I hope we can both disagree with each other and yet also understand each other" (Mendoza).

The most vocal group of supporters have been Asian and Asian American actors. Support has also come a

surprisingly high place-- David Dinkins, who was New York City's mayor in the early 1990s. Dinkins, who was New York City's first (and so far, only) black mayor, wrote to Equity before the vote expressing the union's support "of non traditional and culturally appropriate casting" and told the protesters that the city's Human Rights Commission had started planning a discussion about casting in theaters. Dinkins acknowledged that the protesters had raised valid concerns about casting and race, but decided that fostering "a thriving, diverse theater community committed to artistic freedom of expression" and providing a future job for actors of color in the Broadway and future productions was more important than the one yellowface role (Rosenstein). Dinkins also faced pressure to mount the show regardless of its artistic merit or stereotypes due to *Miss Saigon* being the most expensive production in Broadway history and that the show had already sold over \$25 million worth of tickets (Rosenstein).

Even with the controversy, there is some hope about solid representation in *Miss Saigon*. The West End 2014 revival enhanced the role of John Thomas, perhaps in response to the controversy. The character of John Thomas, Chris's GI friend, is the most nuanced racial representation in the show. In the 2014 revival, John is played by black actor Hugh Maynard. This racial casting decision carried on after Maynard left the show and trickled down to regional productions, including at the Ordway. I

didn't realize until I investigated it specifically that John was not specifically written as a man of color. In fact, the first two actors to play John were white men. Although the part of John didn't change from the original script in the 2014 revival, having John as a black man makes the part much more meaningful. In the first act, John is crude and pressures Chris into buying sexual services of a prostitute. The second act shows a completely new John. After John returns to Atlanta after the war, he founds the Bui Doi Foundation, a charity dedicated to helping the *bui doi* ("dust children," children born to Vietnamese mothers and American fathers). The Bui Doi Foundation helps these kids eat, learn, and reunite with their American fathers after they are abandoned due to their mixed heritage. As he sings "Bui Doi," a haunting song about American responsibility for these children, the audience realizes that "the ones left behind" is not just the *bui doi*. He is also referring to his fellow black vets coming home from Vietnam in a racist society. John takes up the struggle of the *bui doi* because he recognizes his own struggles with fitting in and finding success as a black man in America in these children. John's character arc, where he begins the show as an obnoxious, abrasive soldier and ends the show helping children and reuniting them with their parents, is a nuanced and positive portrayal of a black man onstage. Getting rid of *Miss Saigon* would also mean getting rid of this musically and emotionally powerful role for a black actor.

Vocal supporters of the show are not a monolith, just as the protesters are not a monolith. By interacting critically with the source material and using their own life to analyze how it is positioned, they were able to decide that they supported the show. Supporters who are people of color are not selling out to a white ideal by supporting in this show, because it is a story that they wholeheartedly believe in. These actors and supporters are finding joy in art that represents them or brings them joy.

PART 5: LARGER POWER STRUCTURES

Media coverage of *Miss Saigon* and its protesters and supporters focused mostly on Asian-American actors and Asian-Americans, but the show and the controversy reaches beyond Asian-Americans and affects Asians more generally as well. It has raised questions about people writing from groups that they are not a part of (writing against positionality, in technical terms). *Miss Saigon* also provokes thought about who gets to decide whether a work is offensive.

While the protests were centered very locally to my academic home in Minnesota, the implications of *Miss Saigon* reach internationally. The actors are international, the show itself takes place over different countries, and the impact reaches well across the world. Jon Jon Briones, who played the Engineer in the 2014 revival, is a classic example of the show's transnationalism. (Transnationalism is the theory that in an

increasingly connected world, social and cultural ideas move and exist across national borders.) Briones was the only member of the original cast to perform in the revival, 28 years later. He was in engineering school in the Philippines in 1988 when a friend asked if he wanted to earn a few bucks by helping to facilitate an audition in Manila. He went for it. Once he was cast, he left for London for the West End, which was his first time leaving the Philippines and first time speaking English (Gordon).

Briones' journey with *Miss Saigon* doesn't end there. After the London production, he went home to the Philippines but soon went to do a production in Germany. In an interesting, transnational twist, he met his white American wife, who was playing Ellen in that German production. He played the Engineer starting in London in 1998, and ended up playing the Engineer in 5 more productions before the current Broadway production. The stardom that Briones fought for in *Miss Saigon* allowed him to take other roles, including in George Takei's show *Allegiance* and a role on the TV show *American Horror Story*. When asked whether *Miss Saigon* had changed his life, he simply quipped, "Understatement" (Gordon).

In part 3 I mentioned that most actors in *Miss Saigon*, both the leads and the ensemble, are Asian, but usually are not Vietnamese. The vast majority of them are Filipino or Filipino American, and this distinction is critical because it relates to transnationalism. There's a

historical reason that Filipinos are so common in Western musicals. After the US colonized the Philippines in 1898, they set up their own American school system in the Philippines. Through this school system, the Americans used Western plays as tools to teach Filipinos about American life through song (Chung 64). A Manila journalist notes that “The uncanny Philippine affinity for American popular music is rich testimony to the global culture...for somehow Philippine renditions of American popular songs are both more widespread in the Philippines, and more disturbingly faithful to their originals than they are in the United States today...” (Chung 65).

After 2000, *Miss Saigon* traveled throughout East and Southeast Asia in cities including Hong Kong, Singapore, Manila, and Seoul (Chung 71). Why, then, did theater fans in these cities (including Manila, where many of the stars were from) largely embrace the show, while Asian-Americans were protesting it in the US? Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns argues that the belief in American exceptionalism is built on forgetting history and influencing the minds of former colonial subjects (Chung 71). In Manila, despite widespread support of *Miss Saigon* and its Filipino stars, some academics and progressive groups argued against the show. Maricel J. Gavina and Gi-An Llagas argued that Kim’s American Dream fantasy was “a horrible nightmare” for women in the “developing” world (Chung 79). Filipino protesters of the show’s Manila run saw the show as

perpetuating colonialism and the view that life in America was better than in Asia, much like their American counterparts.

Anyone who says “*Miss Saigon* is just a musical” or just a piece of entertainment” is ignoring how it reflects who has power and who is feeding into other people’s power. For many wealthy, white, suburban theatergoers; this show is likely the most significant interaction with the question of prostitution, transnational movement of children, and the failures of the US military that they will ever have. Whether this is a work that should be representing these themes and Vietnamese people is debatable. The fact that its most ardent defenders are actors in the show—the very people who have the biggest stake in the show continuing to be performed—is troubling. For the actors, it can be hard to criticize the show that gave them jobs and a career. The white producers have also stuck by the show and have largely brushed off the protests, because the controversy over yellowface and racism has not affected the financial success of a show that continues to be wildly popular.

The hardest question about whether to keep *Miss Saigon* comes from its representation. The “zero sum game” I alluded to in the title was my criticism of whether representation gains for one group is outweighed by losses for another group. Is what some people view as racist stereotypes onstage in *Miss Saigon* worth taking critical roles away from Asian and Asian-American musical theater actors? Is boosting the sympathetic and moving role

of John Thomas enough to outweigh Kim's suicide to send her son to America? Is pointing out that this sending-an-Asian-child-to-America happened thousands of times over in real life disrespectful to mothers who are trying to keep their children grounded in the culture they were born into? Is *Miss Saigon* worth it?

This is a very, very tough call to make, considering that there is nothing close to a consensus about whether the show is offensive to the groups it depicts (Asian women, prostitutes, mixed-race people who identify more with one of their races than another, just to name a few). The fact that the show has only existed for 30 years and still faces controversy is a cause for concern and points to the show being offensive. However, since the Jonathan Pryce yellowface controversy was solved in 1991, there have been no protests outside of Minnesota against *Miss Saigon*, including during its second Broadway run beginning in 2014. It's also interesting that there have been no protest over *Miss Saigon* in and around Los Angeles, given that Orange County has a large Vietnamese-American population (Tran). If the show was that offensive, why were there not protests in every city it toured throughout the US and around the world every time it was performed?

Miss Saigon thus reflects who has power. The white producers have the money and the clout to mount a show like *Miss Saigon*, regardless of whether it's offensive to Asians. The Asian and

Asian-American actors in the show have some power because they are staking their careers on a show that faces backlash in their own racial communities. Meanwhile, Asian-Americans protesters and supporters alike must fight to make their opinions about the show known in a white media landscape that wants to make them silent and agreeable. They have the least access to the press or venues to make a statement. In protesting, they are trying to take power to tell their own stories, and to keep outside groups from misrepresenting them. Since supporters are in favor of the status quo, it is easier for them to keep performing the show. It's much harder to listen to the protesters go through the work of ending the show, giving up their voice and financial stake in the show in the process. Protesters must make it so controversial to keep performing the show that the actors and theater owners end the status quo. However, there is no agreement or majority opinion, including within the Asian-American community, about whether the show is offensive or not. This lack of majority opinion, coupled with the power and financial success with the status quo, means that the show will keep going until those in power feel it's too toxic to perform.

PART 6: THE VERDICT- TO *MISS SAIGON* OR NOT TO *MISS SAIGON*?

Anyone making a strong, hard, firm boundary about whether a performance should be banned or not performed at their theater prepares to face backlash. Making a call about a show as

controversial and well-debated like *Miss Saigon* is even harder. You have to be firm enough in your convictions to fight through this.

Here is my verdict- *Miss Saigon* should not be banned, but should not be performed in Minnesota or without thinking hard about its impact. The show itself has too much value (for Asian actors getting jobs if you're cynical, and for humanizing a rarely discussed part of the Vietnam War if you're generous) to never produce it. It should only be performed with a cast and crew that understands the history of the controversy and are dedicated to performing it with love, respect, and critical thought. Saying that the show should still be produced does not mean that I am ignoring the protests, do not understand the power of representation, or that I do not acknowledge the history of colonization and racism presented in the show. But a nuanced view that mounts itself in the gray area, not black and white, is the most important way to respect both the protesters and supporters of the show.

Miss Saigon should only be produced if there are enough Asian actors to play the roles without yellowface. The predominantly white high school in my hometown produced the show in 2009, where 3 out of the 4 lead Asian characters were played by white high schoolers. No matter how good the show is, it is not OK for white actors to play characters of color, because they all too often end up basing their portrayal in stereotypes and not in lived experience. *Miss Saigon* should also

not be produced professionally in Minnesota, because the protesters have made it clear that they do not want the show in the state every time that it came. For other theaters, they should work on community outreach and holding dialogues about the show with Asian community leaders. (This applies for productions inside and outside of the United States). The show has proven to be a great conversation starter, if people are able to question their initial assumptions about why it's worthwhile or why it's offensive.

For protesters who disagree with my reasoning, I encourage them to keep protesting. The show would not be as popular and as meaningful if it weren't for the input and issues raised from the protests. I also encourage protesters to support what they consider positive and multi-dimensional Asian representation, such as the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, with their eyes and dollars. Protesters should try and see *Miss Saigon* to make sure that they are not protesting something that does not come up in the show, in light of the fact that many theaters offered free tickets to the protesters (Quill). However, given the realities of constant misrepresentation, I do not fault them for not wanting to watch a show that they assume will be offensive.

Art is meant to get people talking, and *Miss Saigon* has had people talking, singing, chanting slogans, and screaming throughout its 30-year history. It has helped white theatergoers confront racial representation, American exceptionalism,

and the still painful history of the Vietnam War. It has compelled Asian-Americans to create a mass movement in Minnesota against racist art and make their voices heard in a society that often doesn't listen. It has led to more positive, nuanced, abundant racial representation on Broadway. The impact of *Miss Saigon* has

sent shockwaves through the theater world and the larger American conversation. This conversation is not over, and regardless of which way opinion turns in the near future, *Miss Saigon* will keep teaching.

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