

“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?”: Diversity and the Importance of
Representation in *Hamilton*

Hamilton the Musical is a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Its first Off-Broadway performance was on August 6, 2015 at the New York Public theatre and went on to Broadway to win eleven Tony awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (Runcie 1). Loosely based on Ron Chernow’s 2004 biography, *Alexander Hamilton*, the musical details the life of the founding father and his experiences growing up as an orphan in the West Indies through his political life in the United States (and subsequent death by Aaron Burr). Dealing with issues of race, immigration, public memory, and representation, *Hamilton* was created with an intentionally multiracial cast and features a hip-hop and R&B inspired soundtrack. Although largely heralded as “imaginative, accessible, and thought provoking” by critics and fans alike, there is a growing source of criticism that points to the fact that *Hamilton* may not be as ground-breaking as it first appears (Monteiro 91). The musical does have its shortcomings, especially with regards to embracing diversity, speaking for others in the midst of a largely white audience demographic, perpetuating historical inaccuracies, and erasing historical Black individuals and people of color (enslaved and free) who were present during the time the musical takes place. There is a sense that despite the multiracial casting, this is still a white man’s narrative that the actors of color are engaged in. Thus, although revolutionary in changing traditional tropes and affinities of musical theatre, along with sparking cultural conversation, enough time has passed to look at *Hamilton* through a critical eye, in order to examine its effectiveness and shortcomings in reimagining history to reflect contemporary America.

In her essay, “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*,” Lyra D. Monteiro notes that *Hamilton* participates in a popular historical

writing phenomenon called “Founders Chic,” an effort to make the founding fathers more relatable and likable by celebrating their positive traits, while downplaying their unappealing qualities (89). By extension, the concept of “Founders Chic” implies that the only voices and perspectives that matter are those of rich white men. Remarking on the power of language, Linda Martín Alcoff argues in her article, “The Problem of Speaking for Others” speech and communication often involves power dynamics. Therefore, it is important to view the context in which speech is produced in order to assess its potential impact. Similarly, the show’s creator and lyricist, Lin-Manuel Miranda is Puerto Rican, yet he writes Black individuals and people of color into Alexander Hamilton’s narrative, utilizing the conventionally Black tradition of rap and hip-hop. In applying both Monteiro’s and Alcoff’s ideas as a lens in which to view *Hamilton*, it can be seen that the musical’s attempts to carve out a space in public memory to embrace diversity within the arts are largely metaphoric. In particular, the musical’s intentionally multiracial casting implies a rewriting of people of color into the narrative, reflecting a contemporary America. But in doing so, it suffers from historical inaccuracies and silences historical Black individuals and people of color who were also actively involved in the action of the Revolutionary War, such as Crispus Attucks, Peter Salem, and Seymour Burr, as well as in the daily operations of the musical’s time period (the late 18th to the early 19th century). While the demographics of Broadway are typically white, *Hamilton*’s audiences are whiter, richer, and more educated than most theatre audiences (Demby 1). This is largely due to the musical’s immense popularity and resulting costly ticket prices, begging the question who this racialized performance is for (1). Thus, although the musical does have efforts to embrace diversity within its structure, such as multi-racial casting, it still inadvertently affirms a traditional white narrative surrounding Alexander Hamilton and the founding fathers.

Musicals are cultural vessels that are actively involved in influencing public perception. From the 1940's on, musicals began to gain a narrative backbone, often revealing the "controversial, revolutionary, and nostalgic issues of an evolving American culture" (Maslon 1). Based on Ron Chernow's biography (*Alexander Hamilton*), *Hamilton* tells the story of Alexander Hamilton (Lin-Manuel Miranda in the original Broadway cast), an immigrant who is able to rise up from his impoverished conditions in the West Indies through his impressive rhetorical skills and ambition. When he is nineteen, he goes to America and becomes an ardent supporter of American independence, meeting Aaron Burr (Leslie Odom Jr. in the original Broadway cast), John Laurens (Anthony Ramos in the original Broadway cast), Marquis de Lafayette (Daveed Diggs in the original Broadway cast), and Hercules Mulligan (Okieriete Onaodowan in the original Broadway cast). The musical traces Hamilton's war experiences in the Continental Army, his professional and political life as Treasury Secretary, and subsequent death from a duel with Burr.

As a cultural product, *Hamilton* is actively involved with the reclaiming of history by employing actors of color to play traditionally white founding founders and other historical characters. In the midst of contentious racial politics and a time of hateful rhetoric under a new Presidential administration, contemporary America is reflective of a time and place deeply entrenched in social, political, and economic polarization. *Hamilton* is very much involved in this current cultural dialogue. For instance, on November 18, 2016, members of the New York Broadway cast called out current United States Vice President, Mike Pence, and articulated the hope that he and his administration will incorporate the inclusive messages that *Hamilton* champions into U.S politics—in short, eliminate any cultural cognitive dissonance and recognize the implications of this musical and the cultural work it represents in the real world (Healy and

Mele 1). The musical also comes at a time when the cultural institutions and systems that have traditionally benefited rich white men are being challenged for their lack of representation of diverse individuals. Likewise, there is often a disconnect between the world individuals inhabit on an everyday basis and the world individuals are presented through the media. A recent USC study titled “Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment” reported that out of the 21,000 characters on more than 400 films and TV shows (released from September 2014 through August 2015), “one-third of speaking characters were female” and “28.3 percent of characters with dialogue were from non-white racial/ethnic groups” (Deggans 1). Thus, there is a deep sense of timeliness and importance attributed to *Hamilton* with regards its multi-racial casting, sparking cultural conversations about including people of color into the narrative. More than just a source of entertainment and arguably bigger than just telling Alexander Hamilton’s story, the musical suggests that by “chang[ing] the way that Broadway sounds” and “alter[ing] who gets to tell the story of our founding,” it reflects how diverse contemporary America truly is (McCarter and Miranda 10).

There is much discussion around *Hamilton* as a groundbreaking show in terms of its accessibility. However, because its narrative may be “essentially the same whitewashed version of the founding era... the space only for white heroes,” the cultural context in which it is seen also matters and has important implications (Monteiro 96). The economics of Broadway shows and theatre in general have created largely white audiences. For instance, in the 2015-2016 theatre season, the Broadway League reported that 80% of Broadway audiences were white (“The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2016-2016 Season” 1). With this demographic and the costly prices to see the show (the current face value in New York starts at \$139, with premium tickets in the orchestra starting at \$549), it is highly unlikely that a working class

individual and/or person of color would be able to actually see this musical (Hyman 1) This creates a sphere of exclusivity around the production which impacts the cultural context in which it is received.

Akin to “a dramatic successor to Derek Walcott’s and Jamaica Kincaid’s exploration of the surreality of colonialism,” *Hamilton* engages with many efforts to embrace diversity, most notably through its intentional multiracial casting and a hip-hop and R&B inspired soundtrack (Als 1). Despite this, the narrative itself may still engage in celebrating white history, while silencing historical people of color in the musical. In her essay, “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*,” Lyra D. Monteiro notes that the musical continues to perpetuate an exclusive past by only focusing on white characters and erasing slavery from the narrative. Despite the fact that “during revolutionary era, around 14 percent of New York City’s inhabitants were African American” and there were many black individuals and people of color who did fight in the American Revolution, there are only a few references of slavery within the show’s lyrics (Monteiro 93). Additionally, with the exception of a quick lyrical reference to Sally Hemings (“There’s a letter on my desk from the President/Haven’t even put my bags down yet/Sally be a lamb, darlin’, won’tcha open it?”), a woman enslaved to Thomas Jefferson and who had a sexual relationship with Jefferson, there are no historical black characters or people of color (enslaved or not) mentioned in the musical (Miranda). Combined with the infrequent references to slavery, the importance of slavery during the Revolutionary era is largely minimized and almost insinuates that it did not exist. While the concept of having a multiracial cast is a method of embracing diversity, the narrative these actors of color engage in matters. Monteiro notes that it is problematic to fill the role of white founding

fathers with black and brown actors without acknowledging the fact that “the ancestors of these same actors were actively excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought” (93).

The erasure of slavery from *Hamilton* also presents historical inaccuracies. Although some may argue that *Hamilton* is just a musical and therefore does not necessarily have to be entirely historically accurate, the musical has a cultural responsibility in what it espouses. Additionally, Lin-Manuel Miranda has remarked that he “wants historians to take [*Hamilton*] seriously,” suggesting that Miranda wanted to maintain a sense of historical efficacy in his representation (McCarter and Miranda 32). However, as Monteiro argues, putting actors of color into traditionally white roles has serious implications, especially *Hamilton*’s erasure of slavery. Ironically, antislavery has a much bigger emphasis than slavery in the show. Several instances in the lyrics point to Hamilton’s suggested abolitionist views, such as Hamilton talking to Burr, Laurens, Mulligan, and Lafayette (“A bunch of revolutionary manumission abolitionists? /Give me a position, show me where the ammunition is!”) or Eliza Hamilton talking in allusion to a now deceased Alexander Hamilton (“I speak out against slavery/You could have done so much more if you only had time”), implying his antislavery views (Miranda). However, while critics and historians alike have pointed out that Hamilton did not have slaves (which may have been simply due to his poor economic situation that he often found himself in), Eliza’s family were “major slave owners” and Hamilton was known for his practice of hiring slaves from their individual owners in order to complete tasks for him (Monteiro 95-96). There are no direct links to Hamilton’s abolitionist political views and because Hamilton was more of an opportunist individual, it is difficult to discern if his speculated thoughts on antislavery would be genuine or not.

The phenomenon of creating a “romantic representation of [Hamilton’s] abolitionism” has serious implications for how and why certain narratives are told (“Hamilton: A Revolutionary Manumission Abolitionist?” 1). In particular, this rendering of Hamilton as someone staunchly against slavery (“We’ll never be truly free/ until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me”) is not unique to Miranda’s interpretation (Miranda). *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow inspired the musical’s conception and Chernow, a white man, served as the show’s historian. Within his book, Chernow glosses over Hamilton’s involvement with slavery, instead glorifying his role as a member of the New York Manumission Society which he implies reveals Hamilton’s deep loyalty to the abolitionist movement and cause (Monteiro 95). While a sense of speculation and interpretation may be necessary in the work of a historian, drawing such bold conclusions has important consequences in how a figure is remembered in public memory and culture, especially through a vessel as critically and commercially successful as *Hamilton*. Miranda perpetuates Chernow’s views on Hamilton’s abolitionist stance. Thus, the typical theatre go-er that is not well-versed in Alexander Hamilton’s history may also believe this romantic view of him, revealing the importance of what stories are told and how they are presented.

In a metafictional way, *Hamilton* deals with issues of writing, representation, and remembering. Therefore, the musical itself is actively engaged with this concern for how history is remembered and rewritten. Likewise, it matters how *Hamilton* represents, shapes, and challenges history. However, despite the musical’s claim of being “a story about America then, told by America now,” a crucial question of whose history is being remembered and celebrated is unresolved by the end of *Hamilton* (Delman 1). In Linda Martín Alcoff’s essay, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” she advises a “reconceptuali[zation] [of] discourse...as an event, which

includes speaker, words, hearers, location, language, and so on” (11). The context in which communication occurs does matter and for the case of *Hamilton*, it is crucial. While he is not Black, Lin-Manuel Miranda is a person of color as a Puerto Rican. He writes rap and hip-hop inspired music for a culture and group of people he does not belong to, a potential instance of speaking for others. However, by casting predominately Black actors in the main roles (Aaron Burr, George Washington, Hercules Mulligan, and Marquis de Lafayette, for instance), Miranda may be celebrating the traditionally Black form of rap. He also remarked that he utilized rap within the show as “a form, not content,” emphasizing its storytelling quality and “lyrical density” (McCarter 10). However, the consequences of Miranda speaking for others is most prominent with regards to the erasure of slavery from the narrative. In doing so, he inadvertently writes Black people into a narrative that is accessible, but accessible for whom? Because “persons from dominant groups who speak for others are often treated as authenticating presences that confer legitimacy and credibility on the demands of the subjugated speakers,” it is important to consider how the musical would have been different if it had a person of color historian guiding discussions of slavery and including historical people of color, both enslaved and free, into the narrative (Alcoff 2).

Alcoff also argues that there is no complete or definite solution for the problem of speaking for others, but there is “possibility that its dangers can be decreased” (9). As is the case with *Hamilton*, it may be ambiguous where these instances occur. In his book, *Theatre and Race*, Harvey Young notes the distinction between colorblind and color-conscious casting. Promoting the universality of stories from the perspective of any individual, colorblind casting was first championed for its emphasis on valuing the talent of an actor over their appearance (58). Commonly utilized in Shakespearean companies and festivals, this casting method “offers a

glimpse of a utopian future” where “racial assumptions... prejudices, and discriminatory beliefs that can serve as social obstacles, no longer exist” (57). However, one of the biggest obstacles to the idealistic belief in colorblind casting is that often times this method simply constitutes an insertion of diverse individuals in works written by white playwrights (59). This also can be controversial when white actors are casted to play characters that are traditionally people of color. For instance, in November 2016, there was a Kent State production of *The Mountaintop* which featured a white actor playing Martin Luther King Jr. (Eyring 1). Such ignorant actions (almost evoking the damaging tradition of white actors in brownface, yellowface, redface, or blackface) ignore the systemic inequalities that people of color have historically felt in the theatre and in everyday society. On the other hand, color-conscious casting practices, first advocated by August Wilson, highlight the importance of diversity adding inherent value to the performance, encouraging “audiences to see race and to think critically about its meaning and value in performance” (60).

Appearing to utilize some elements of color-conscious casting methods (by intentionally casting actors of color), *Hamilton* ventures into color-blind ideology with regards to the narrative it tells. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Miranda argues that “you don't distance the audience by putting an actor of color in a role that you would think of as default Caucasian, you excite people and you draw them in” (France 2). While this statement echoes the spirit of color-conscious casting methods, it does not necessary hold up if there is no active acknowledgement that the narrative itself still celebrates the white founding fathers. By extension, the inclusion of people of color into a white narrative (while silencing historical people of color who were also present in the Revolutionary Era) may detach the (largely) white audience from the extent of “violent, anti-black histories and sentiment in the United States”

(McMaster 1). For instance, during “Cabinet Battle #1,” Thomas Jefferson (Daveed Diggs) raps in support of the slavery system in the South (“Don’t tax the South cuz we got it made in the / shade/ In Virginia, we plant seeds in the ground,” espousing its economic prosperity (Miranda). However, this simple insertion of Diggs into Jefferson’s slave-owning character obscures the history of racialized violence within the United States with Digg’s blackness (McMaster 1). Thus, Miranda’s idealistic belief that inserting actors of color into a traditionally white narrative instantly “makes the story more immediate and more accessible to a contemporary audience” is unfounded and contradictory (France 1). It is plausible to believe that by depicting actors of color in the musical, slavery did not have to be directly mentioned or represented on stage, almost using the presence of actors of color as a metaphor for all the cultural history of Black individuals. Christopher Jackson, who originated the role of George Washington, believes that the musical dealt with an implicit view of slavery, remarking that “by having a multicultural cast, it gives us, as actors of color, the chance to provide an additional context just by our presence onstage, filling these characters up” (Monteiro 96). However, should people of color feel ownership of a white narrative that actively erases historical people of color?

The purpose in critiquing *Hamilton* and its attempts of embracing diversity within both its form and structure is to examine the underlying issues that continues to perpetuate a power hierarchy within theatre and explore various options to make it stronger. Despite the multi-racial casting, there are structural questions of exclusivity that are superimposed on the musical: telling the story of a white founding father and other white figures with actors of color, with the absence of people of color characters who also participated in Revolutionary Era daily functions. Alcoff argues that speaking for others addresses issues of representation, identity, power hierarchies, and empowerment-all issues that transcend boundaries of time and place. While it may be

impossible to know the true effects of speaking for others, responsibility and self-efficacy are vitally important in creating more equalized theatre, media, and cultural products. *Hamilton* is important because it carves out a space in which individuals can discuss and celebrate diversity, sparking cultural conversations that matter. However, these conversations must go one step further and ask “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?,” and how that story is being told long after the curtain falls so that (eventually) society can proudly answer back: us, in every sense of the word (Miranda).

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