

Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*

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Hamilton: An American Musical. Thomas Kail, Director; Sander Jacobs, Jill Furman, Jeffrey Seller and The Public Theater, Producers; Lin-Manuel Miranda, Writer: book, music, and lyrics; Ron Chernow, Historical Consultant. Richard Rodgers Theatre, New York City, NY; August 2015–October 2016.

The American public has long been enthralled with the mythology of the founding fathers. Though a recent (and recurring) trend within popular history writing, “founders chic” can also be experienced on historic house tours at places such as Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Hamilton Grange that focus on lauding while also humanizing the founders.¹ Overall, the impression these sites give of the Revolutionary era echoes the majority of American history textbooks: the only people who lived during this period—or the only ones who mattered—were wealthy (often slaveowning) white men. There are exceptions to this pattern, such as the African American programming at Colonial Williamsburg, the interpretation of the mills at Lowell, Massachusetts, and the Smithsonian’s recent exhibition about the enslaved families at Monticello.² Such challenges to the “exclusive past” are absolutely necessary for our present, as we strive to live up to an ideal of all people being equal and create a world in which women’s voices are no longer silenced and Black Lives Matter.

Currently on Broadway, MacArthur fellow Lin-Manuel Miranda’s hip-hop musical *Hamilton* brings to life the founding era of the United States in an engaging show that draws heavily on Ron Chernow’s 2004 biography, *Alexander Hamilton*. The play follows its main character from his childhood in the Caribbean—as the opening line of the show puts it, he was “a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a / Scotsman”—through his meteoric rise to serve as George Washington’s assistant

¹ H. W. Brands, “Founders Chic,” *Atlantic*, September 2003, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/09/Founders-Chic/302773/>.

² Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006); “Slavery at Jefferson’s Monticello: Paradox of Liberty,” <http://slavery.monticello.org/slavery-at-monticello>.



Daveed Diggs (Marquis de Lafayette), Okieriete Onaodowan (Hercules Mulligan), and Anthony Ramos (John Laurens), perform alongside fellow actor and *Hamilton* writer Lin-Manuel Miranda (Alexander Hamilton). (Photo credit: Joan Marcus.)

during the Revolutionary War, his career as the nation's first secretary of the treasury, and the decline of his political career following a sex scandal, to his death in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr. With a cast dominated by actors of color, the play is nonetheless yet another rendition of the "exclusive past," with its focus on the deeds of "great white men" and its silencing of the presence and contributions of people of color in the Revolutionary era.

The play began at New York's Public Theater, performed before sold-out crowds in an extended run. In a *New York Times* cover story, Michael Paulson hailed *Hamilton* as "a turning point for the art form and a cultural conversation piece."³ While only time will tell if *Hamilton* represents a turning point, the musical has undeniably sparked a cultural conversation. Before opening on Broadway, the show had already sold over two hundred thousand tickets, one of the largest pre-opening sales figures in Broadway history. Since then, critics have overwhelmingly praised the production.

The play is fairly historically accurate, reflecting Chernow's work as the show's historical consultant. The inaccuracies that do remain serve an important narrative

³ Michael Paulson, "'Hamilton' Heads to Broadway in a Hip-Hop Retelling," *New York Times*, July 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/13/theater/hamilton-heads-to-broadway-in-a-hip-hop-retelling.html>.

purpose—an early scene in a tavern where the Marquis de Lafayette, Aaron Burr, Hamilton, John Laurens, and Hercules Mulligan meet could never have happened, while some other events are transposed in time.⁴ The play also makes impressive use of actual historical documents, many of which are set to music during the play. For example, Samuel Seabury's "Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress," George Washington's Farewell Address, and the letters Burr and Hamilton sent to each other prior to their duel become songs, with the actors even singing the signatures, "A-dot-Burr" and "A-dot-Ham."

The actors consciously refer to the shaping of historical memory throughout the play, from early references to "when our children tell our story," to a beautiful, moving scene in which Hamilton's wife, Eliza, heartbroken at her husband's betrayal, sings "I'm erasing myself from the narrative" as she burns her letters. The play's final song—and final line—also drives home the importance of the creation of historical narratives: "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?"

However, on some of the most important issues of this period—race and slavery—the musical falls short. Race is, in some ways, front and center in this play, as the founding fathers are without exception played by black and Latino men. These choices, which creators and critics have dubbed "color-blind casting," are in fact far from color blind. The racialized musical forms that each of the characters sings makes this particularly clear. For example, among the actors playing the three Schuyler sisters, the one who sings the "white" music of traditional Broadway (Philippa Soo as Hamilton's wife, Eliza), reads as white (she is actually Chinese American), while the eldest sister Angelica who sings in the more "black" genres of R&B and rap, is black (Renée Elise Goldsberry). Similarly, King George III, who sings "white" '60s Britpop is performed by a white actor (Jonathan Groff—who was cast to replace another white actor, Brian D'Arcy James, who left the show after its initial run at the Public Theater) while the hip-hop-spouting revolutionaries are all black and Latino. The fact that writer Lin-Manuel Miranda, a Puerto Rican, plays Hamilton, further makes clear the intentions behind the casting. His stand-in, Javier Muñoz (who performs once a week in Miranda's stead), is also Puerto Rican, marking Hamilton's Caribbean connection in contrast to the other Euro-American founders, all of whom are black.

While most critics love the casting—calling it imaginative, accessible, and thought provoking, others take issue with the premise of casting black actors as the founding fathers. In a piece subtitled "Black Actors Dress Up Like Slave Traders . . . and It's Not Halloween," Ishmael Reed asks, "Can you imagine Jewish actors in Berlin's theaters taking roles of Goering? Goebbels? Eichmann? Hitler?"⁵ When asked directly in a *Wall Street Journal* interview about how it feels to portray a white slaveowner, Daveed Diggs, who plays Jefferson, avoided the question

⁴ For more on Miranda's use of history, see his discussion of his ahistorical choices on Rap Genius (http://genius.com/Lin_Manuel), and Joanne Freeman's assessment of his use of history ("How *Hamilton* Uses History," *Slate*, November 11, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/11/how_lin_manuel_miranda_used_real_history_in_writing_hamilton.html).



As Alexander Hamilton's wife, Eliza Schuyler Hamilton, actress Phillipa Soo (left) dances alongside Schuyler's sisters Angelica (Renée Elise Goldsberry, center) and Peggy (Jasmine Cephas Jones, right). (Photo credit: Joan Marcus.)

altogether.⁶ By contrast, theater critic Hilton Als perceives “something new and unrecognizable . . . on the stage—a dramatic successor to Derek Walcott’s and Jamaica Kincaid’s literary explorations of the surrealism of colonialism.”⁷

⁵ Ishmael Reed, “‘Hamilton: The Musical’: Black Actors Dress Up Like Slave Traders . . . and It’s Not Halloween,” *CounterPunch*, August 21, 2015, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/21/hamilton-the-musical-black-actors-dress-up-like-slave-tradersand-its-not-halloween>.

⁶ Branden Janese, “‘Hamilton’ Roles Are This Rapper’s Delight,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/hamilton-roles-are-this-rappers-delight-1436303922>.

Chernow's reaction to the play's casting is telling: "I remember . . . thinking 'Oh my goodness, they're all black and Latino! What on earth is Lin-Manuel thinking?' I sat down . . . thinking to myself ' . . . I need to sit down and talk to Lin-Manuel alone. We're talking about the founding fathers of the United States.'"⁸ That incongruity is precisely what makes the play special to Diggs, who plays Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette and says, "I walked out of the show with a sense of ownership over American history. Part of it is seeing brown bodies play these people."⁹ This idea that black and brown people were not actually part of this history is reflected in a line from a radio spot advertising the show, which declares, "This is the story of America then, told by America now." Others, including Chernow, have described the cast as representing "Obama's America."¹⁰ The idea that this musical "looks like America looks now"¹¹ in contrast to "then," however, is misleading and actively erases the presence and role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since. America "then" *did* look like the people in this play, if you looked outside of the halls of government. This has never been a white nation. The idea that the actors who are performing on stage represent newcomers to this country in any way is insulting. Miranda is Puerto Rican, meaning his parents and even his grandparents were born American citizens; the African American actors in the play may have ancestors that fought in the same Revolutionary War depicted on stage—and may also be the descendants of enslaved people on whose backs the founders built their fortunes and sustained their lifestyles. More pointedly, it is problematic to have black and brown actors stand in for the great white men of the early United States in a play that does not acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought.

This realization brings attention to a truly damning omission in the show: despite the proliferation of black and brown bodies onstage, not a single enslaved or free person of color exists as a character in this play. For the space of only a couple of bars, a chorus member assumes the role of Sally Hemings, but is recognizable as such only by those who catch Jefferson's reference to the enslaved woman with whom he had an ongoing sexual relationship. Unless one listens carefully to the lyrics—which do mention slavery a handful of times—one could easily assume that slavery did not exist in this world, and certainly that it was not an important part of the lives and livelihoods of the men who created the nation.

During the Revolutionary era, around 14 percent of New York City's inhabitants were African American, the majority of whom were enslaved.¹² In the Caribbean,

⁷ Hilton Als, "Boys in the Band," *New Yorker*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/09/boys-in-the-band>.

⁸ Judy Rosen, "The American Revolutionary," *T Magazine*, July 8, 2015, 59.

⁹ Janese, "'Hamilton' Roles Are This Rapper's Delight"

¹⁰ Jennifer Schuessler, "Starring on Broadway, Obama and Alexander Hamilton," *ArtsBeat* (blog), *New York Times*, July 18, 2015, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/18/starring-on-broadway-obama-and-alexander-hamilton>.

¹¹ Paulson, "'Hamilton' Heads to Broadway in a Hip-Hop Retelling"



Daveed Diggs as Thomas Jefferson and the ensemble of *Hamilton*. The woman kneeling to the left of Diggs mimes the part of the slave with whom Jefferson had children, Sally Hemings, during the song “What’d I Miss.” (Photo credit: Joan Marcus.)

the numbers were much higher. In the 1790s, a slave was present in one in five of the city’s white households.¹² Thus, every scene in the play contains an opportunity for an enslaved character—from the tavern where the revolutionaries meet in act 1, to the Winter’s Ball where Hamilton meets his future wife, Eliza. In the showstopping tune “The Room Where It Happens,” in which Aaron Burr (played by Leslie Odom Jr.) laments his exclusion from the dinner where Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison made secret decisions, the line “No one else was in the room where it happened” completely erases the slaves who would have been in that room serving dinner.

This pattern of erasing the presence of black bodies continues throughout the play, as the role of people of color in the Revolution itself is silenced. Although abolitionist John Laurens did not succeed in raising the black battalion that the actor portraying him refers to twice in the play, thousands of people of color participated in the war—some as soldiers, but many others as groomsmen and in other service capacities, aiding white troops. Indeed, one of the first men to die in

¹² Patrick Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery,” in *Slavery in New York*, eds. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: New Press, 2005), 114.

¹³ Steven Mintz, “New York and Slavery,” *New-York Journal of American History* 66, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 54.

the Revolution was a man of African and Native American ancestry, Crispus Attucks, who was killed by the British in the Boston Massacre in 1770. More blatantly, the play omits the role of Hercules Mulligan's slave, Cato, who bravely assisted Mulligan's efforts to spy on the British.¹⁴ In *Hamilton*, Mulligan sings about these accomplishments as if they were his alone.

In the script itself, slavery is unquestionably downplayed. In interviews, Miranda points to the brief lyrical references as proof that the play takes slavery seriously. He emphasizes that the third line of the play mentions slavery—but the reference is so vague that it requires historical knowledge to understand its meaning and obscures Hamilton's participation in the institution ("by fourteen, they placed him [Hamilton] in charge of a trading charter. / And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted / away across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up").

On the other hand, *antislavery* receives more emphasis, represented in the first act by Laurens and later following Hamilton's death, when Eliza sings, "I speak out against slavery. / You could have done so much more if you only had / Time." In reference to the musical, historian David Waldstreicher notes that Miranda follows a familiar pattern: "Founders chic historians emplot slavery when it serves to upraise the character of their heroes, i.e. Adams and Hamilton, and diss their flawed characters, i.e. Jefferson."¹⁵ Indeed, the only time that slavery is mentioned for more than a single phrase is in one of Hamilton's rap battles with Jefferson, where he taunts:

Would you like to join us, or stay mellow
Doin' whatever the hell it is you do in Monticello? . . .
A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor,
Your debts are paid cuz you don't pay for labor.
"We plant seeds in the South. We create."
Yeah, keep ranting,
we know who's really doing the planting.

In interviews, Miranda has noted, "When I encountered Alexander Hamilton I was immediately captivated. He's an inspirational figure to me. And an aspirational one."¹⁶ Elsewhere, it has been reported that "Hamilton reminded him of his father."¹⁷ It is hardly surprising that someone who displays this kind of adoration of a founding father would find it difficult to truly incorporate slavery into the story of his life. Though it does not appear in the play, in interviews Miranda has stressed Hamilton's membership in the New York Manumission Society, while glossing over the fact that members of his wife's family were major slaveowners. While

¹⁴ Paul R. Misencik, *The Original American Spies: Seven Covert Agents of the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 110–22.

¹⁵ Comment on Joseph A. Adelman, "Hamilton, Art, History, and Truth," *The Junto* (blog), August 31, 2015, <http://earlyamericanists.com/2015/08/31/hamilton-art-history-and-truth>.

¹⁶ Rosen, "American Revolutionary."

¹⁷ Rebecca Mead, "All about the Hamiltons," *New Yorker*, February 9, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/hamiltons>.

Hamilton himself may not have owned slaves, he certainly was linked to transactions involving them, including hiring them from their owners to do work for him. In this, Miranda follows Chernow's book closely, which speaks of Hamilton's abolitionism at every opportunity while eliding his involvement with slavery. One wonders whether, had he employed a person of color as his historian, Miranda would have been able to write a play that downplays race and slavery to the extent that this one does. But there are few historians of color who work on the founding fathers, let alone on Alexander Hamilton specifically—most are driven instead by projects that chip away at the exclusive past typified by the cult of the founders.

The question of slavery comes up frequently in interviews with cast members, and their answers tend to mirror Miranda's—often citing that third line or a rap battle over slavery that was cut from the show. Cast member Christopher Jackson told the *New Yorker* that the musical provided an implicit critique of slavery: "The Broadway audience doesn't like to be preached to.... 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."¹⁸

Miranda certainly is bringing back to life what *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley calls "a thoroughly archived past," and as such, his work bears certain responsibilities to the public. Thus, it is concerning that the play adopts the old bootstrap ideology of the "American Dream," with the second line in the play hailing how Hamilton, despite his humble origins, "got a lot farther by working a lot harder, / by being a lot smarter, / by being a self-starter." This may account for the universal acclaim Hamilton has received from conservative commentators.¹⁹ Such a narrative is particularly problematic in this case, as it belies the ways in which structural inequalities block many people of color from achieving the American Dream today. It is also historically inappropriate, given that the play is set in a world in which, no matter how much harder they worked, the direct ancestors of the black and brown actors who populate the stage and sing these lines would never have been able to get as far as a white man like Alexander Hamilton could.

The play can thus be seen as insidiously invested in trumpeting the deeds of wealthy white men, at the expense of everyone else, despite its multiracial casting. It is unambiguously celebratory of Hamilton and Washington, and though it makes fun of Jefferson, he is nonetheless a pivotal figure. Sadly, that is where this revolutionary musical fails to push any envelopes: the history it tells is essentially the same whitewashed version of the founding era that has lost favor among many academic and public historians. Here there is only space for white heroes.

¹⁸ Mead, "All about the Hamiltons."

¹⁹ David Brooks, "The Hamilton Experience" *New York Times*, February 24, 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/opinion/david-brooks-the-hamilton-experience.html>; Peggy Noonan, "How to Stage a Revolution" *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2015 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-stage-a-revolution-1428620603>; Richard Brookhiser, "Funky Founder," *National Review*, March 21, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/415767/funky-founder-richard-brookhiser>.



Christopher Jackson as George Washington and the ensemble of *Hamilton*.
(Photo credit: Joan Marcus.)

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, cast member Leslie Odom Jr. said that, before being in the show:

I was a student of African-American history. I cared way more about the achievements and hard-won battles of black people in this country than I did about the founding fathers. But this show has been such a gift to me in that way because I feel that it's my history, too, for the first time ever. We all fought in the Revolutionary War. I think this show is going to hopefully make hundreds of thousands of people of color feel a part of something that we don't often feel a part of.²⁰

But is it necessarily a good thing to feel ownership over a celebratory, white narrative of the American past? Is it a good thing for people of color to feel connected to the story of Hamilton, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Burr? Or is this the historical version of the Clarks' Doll Test that was so pivotal in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, encouraging people of color to see the important past as limited to the deeds of white men, while further silencing the historical role of people of color?

It is also noteworthy that people of color likely do not comprise the majority of the audience—the Broadway League finds that about 80 percent of all Broadway

²⁰ Kathryn Lurie, "Playing the Man Who Shot Hamilton." *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/playing-the-man-who-shot-hamilton-1438896589>.

ticket buyers are white.²¹ This does not stop creators and spectators from repeatedly calling the musical “accessible,” which is coded language suggesting that young people and people of color cannot understand history unless it is made “accessible” to them. Treasury Secretary John Lew said that when talking with Miranda, Chernow, and the cast, “They kept coming back to the importance of bringing history to a broader audience, and they talked about raising money to bring more students to future shows, to open it up in an accessible way to expose more people to a very important chapter of our history.”²² Embedded here is the rhetoric of access and exposure that plagues museums and historic sites that are wedded to missions of “sharing” the exclusive past with a public that wants something more. In this case, there are also racial implications to the plan, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, to bring twenty thousand public school students to the show: in New York City, the overwhelming majority of schoolchildren are black and brown.²³ Whenever a historical story is shared, it has an ideological component. What ideology is being inculcated by a show like this, at the same time that it engages its audience?

The musical undoubtedly does have a special impact on this audience. Seth Andrew, the founder of Democracy Prep Public Schools took 120 students to see the show and reported, “It was unquestionably the most profound impact I’ve ever seen on a student body.”²⁴ And Miranda has noted that young people “come alive in their heads” when they’re watching the show.²⁵ If the goal is to make them excited about theater, music, and live performance, great. But reviews of the show regularly imply that what is powerful about the show is how it brings *history* to life. So I ask again: Is this the history that we most want black and brown youth to connect with—one in which black lives so clearly do not matter?

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²¹ Michael Paulson, “New American Stories,” *New York Times*, September 13, 2015, sec. AR; Broadway League, “The Demographics of the Broadway Audience, 2013–2014,” http://www.broadwayleague.com/index.php?url_identifier=the-demographics-of-the-broadway-audience.

²² Annie Lowrey, “Treasury Secretary Jack Lew Loved *Hamilton*,” *Daily Intelligencer* (blog), *New York Magazine*, August 27, 2015, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/08/treasury-secretary-jack-lew-loved-hamilton.html>.

²³ Gordon Cox, “Broadway’s ‘Hamilton’ Will Play to 20,000 New York City Public School Students,” *Variety*, October 27, 2015. <http://variety.com/2015/legit/news/hamilton-tickets-new-york-city-public-school-students-1201627589/>.

²⁴ Paulson, “‘Hamilton’ Heads to Broadway in a Hip-Hop Retelling.”

²⁵ Simon Vozick-Levinson, “Revolution on Broadway: Inside Hip-Hop History Musical ‘Hamilton,’” *Rolling Stone*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/revolution-on-broadway-inside-hip-hop-history-musical-hamilton-20150806>.