

Rethinking Education: Hamilton
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“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?” is one of the most famous lines from *Hamilton*, the musical. The real question might be: who re-tells your story? Ultimately, *Hamilton* did force U.S. public memory to revisit what they know about the Revolutionary period and how it is told by visually including people of color in the story of the Founding Fathers. Lin-Manuel Miranda’s multicultural, contemporary presentation of the Revolutionary War Era works to challenge singularity in history and give more ownership of the time period to people of color

Presenting a portion of history often centered around a group of white men through people of color directly calls out the cultural exclusion which takes place in history. The visual inclusion of people of color in a whitewashed Revolutionary narrative does have power from a narrative storytelling perspective. Scholars have asserted that portraying the historical events in *Hamilton* through actors and actresses of color challenges exclusionary histories by centering for Black, Indigenous and people of color in a popular narrative in public memory (Schrader, 2019, p. 263). Lin-Manuel Miranda fully intended for the effect of just viewing this alternate history, and the symbolism that carries its effect on public memory.

Yet, *Hamilton* mentions slavery only in a very particular, limited way that often favors its protagonist and downplays the reality of the institution of slavery in U.S. history. The musical’s rap battles between characters Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson exemplify how it is used as a plot tool rather than accepted as a historical reality. In “Cabinet Battle #1, the two characters are arguing over whether or not the government should assume state debts and establish a national bank, a plan proposed by Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 161). Below are some of Jefferson’s early lines in the song:

“If New York’s in debt—

Why should Virginia bear it?

Uh! Our debts are paid, I’m afraid.

Don’t tax the South cuz we got it made in the shade.

In Virginia, we plant seeds in the ground.

We create. You just wanna move our money around.

This financial plan is an outrageous demand.

And it’s too many damn pages for any man to understand.

Stand with me. In the land of the free.

And pray to God we never see Hamilton’s candidacy.

Look, when Britain taxed our tea, we got frisky.

Imagine what gon’ happen when you try to tax our whiskey.” (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 161)

Here, Jefferson refers to the Southern states' agrarian economy, which could not have succeeded without enslaved persons doing the labor of his and other plantations. He represents early fiscally conservative ideals, and some of his language was modeled after Wall Street executives today according to Miranda (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 161). Here is part of Hamilton's response:

"Thomas. That was a real nice declaration.

Welcome to the present. We're running a real nation.

Would you like to join us, or stay mellow,

Doin' whatever the hell it is you do in Monticello?

If we assume the debts, the Union gets a new line of credit, a financial diuretic.

How do you not get it? If we're aggressive and competitive

The Union gets a boost. You'd rather give it a sedative?

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." (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 161)

This is a key moment between these two characters plot-wise and it is one of the most direct mentions of the institution of slavery that exists within the work, despite being very indirect. Here Hamilton claims a moral high ground above Jefferson, exposing him for owning slaves and addressing the influence of enslavement on the Southern economy. It supports the North/South dichotomy frequently presented in U.S. history and suggests that Hamilton is not involved with slavery or that the North is not implicated in the institution. However, historical records show that Hamilton did in fact buy and sell enslaved persons for the Schuyler family, serving as their accountant (Monteiro, 2016, p. 96).

In addition to Hamilton's specific involvement, historical records also show that in the late 1700's in New York City, a slave was present in one out of five white households (Monteiro, 2016, p. 94). That statistic means that Hamilton frequented social circles including many slave-owners beyond the Schuylers, and "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" (Monteiro, 2016, p. 94). Yet in the musical, Hamilton would not have been able to wield such effective lines against Jefferson if his own involvement in the institution of slavery was addressed. This instance is one example of a broader trend in *Hamilton* of failing to implicate all the Founding Fathers in the social, legal and economic institution of slavery in the U.S., which was constructed both in tandem with and to advance U.S. democracy

More concerning in regards to Hamilton's presentation of enslaved people in U.S. history—and lack thereof—is the content made for the musical that was left out. A third rap battle was written for between Jefferson and Hamilton, consisting of a debate over abolishing slavery in the U.S. "Cabinet Battle #3" was released on the *Hamilton Mixtape* in December, 2016, more than a year after the

musical's Broadway run and rise to stardom began and separate from the performance itself or its original soundtrack.

“Sir, the constitution clearly states
That the states have to wait until eighteen-oh-eight to debate
On whether to end the slave trade.
And whether or not you want it, guys
That is the final compromise we made.
But for a second, let us say
That we can legislate unanimous emancipation
Freedom reigns, and yes, it's great.
We cannot cure prejudice or righteous, desperate hate
So back to Africa or do they get a separate state?
In 1784, I tried to float banning slavery in the West.
My notion didn't get a single vote.
Slavery's a sin. It's growing like a cancer

But we can't address a question if we do not have an answer” (Miranda, 2016).

Hamilton's portrayal of Thomas Jefferson is questioning the presence of prejudice on a meta-level, and what moving forward with abolition would look like to him. It would have been a good contribution to how the Founding Fathers discussed abolition in the early days of the country and would have at least spent some time directly addressing the issue. At the same time, and more importantly, Jefferson's lines paint an extremely rosy picture of how he treated enslaved persons. He presents racism as a kind of “sickness” that nations fall prey to and appears to excuse white colonists' direct establishment of racist thought in the social, economic, and legal realms of the U.S. (Galella, 2018, p. 376).

Here Jefferson talks about himself almost as if he were trying to ban slavery in the West when no one else would. It is a dangerously limited perspective to make a slave-owning man, who fathered children with enslaved Black woman Sally Hemings, seem like he is on the side of abolitionists. This could have been an opportunity for Miranda to emphasize the white supremacist thought that was prevalent amongst the Founders at this time, instead of excusing Jefferson's behavior

While the end result of their omissions within the musical makes *Hamilton* appear exactly so when put in the greater context of his own historical narrative, the general public's memory does not retain all these background facts, and the popular musical's limited portrayal of its titular character only pushes them further from view. The reality is that structural oppression is “fundamental, not exceptional, to the founding of the United States and its conception of freedom” (Galella, 2018, p. 375), something that *Hamilton* widely misses.

There is no question that *Hamilton* started a national conversation around how public memory conceptualizes the Revolutionary Era in U.S. history. It remains one of the most diverse musicals to ever grace the Broadway stage, and is one of the most popular in decades. During its Tony award season it won eleven awards across a broad range of categories, from actor and actress awards to score and writing (Caulfield, 2016). Its original cast album and the “Hamilton Mixtape,” which included *Cabinet Battle #3* among other songs and covers by pop artists, each topped charts and remained on top even longer than many non-musical theater albums. They helped *Hamilton* gain more media attention than most other musicals in U.S. history (Caulfield, 2016). That attention can be a powerful tool in framing the public conversation around historical revision and inclusion, something *Hamilton* was fully aware of in marketing its race-conscious casting in its public statements. The musical had the opportunity to shape viewers’ concepts of history and use the media to inform them of topics they may not have fully understood before, which is the potential of news framing for educational purposes (Tuchman, 1978, p. 3).

However, *Hamilton* still erred towards passivity in revising history; it ultimately did not make enough of an effort to expand upon the white-centric Founding Era narratives most common in public memory and challenge them (Styrt, 2018, p. 14). The musical did not include any significant characters representative of diverse histories that were also foundational during the Revolution, instead relying on visual symbolism to carry the political and historical significance in the public eye. There was also not a single Indigenous character in the musical, and it in fact invoked Manifest Destiny ideals in multiple songs where the Founding Fathers sung about “fighting for [their] land back” and “claiming [their] promised land” (Galella, 2018, p. 377). The inability for *Hamilton* to address the colonialism and genocide ever-present in the construction of the United States undercuts its attempt to provide cultural ownership to groups in the U.S. whose ancestors lived these historical realities. It celebrates racial diversity “without concern for economic justice” or real awareness of persisting systemic racism (Kajikawa, 2018, p. 475).

Despite this, the show creators constantly refer to the “accessibility” of the musical, which scholars suggest is coded language signaling to young people and people of color that they cannot understand or relate to history unless it is made accessible to them (Craft, 2018, p. 442). *Hamilton*’s historical revisionism and how it marketed itself to the media contradict each other. It does contribute to historical “othering,” through its exclusion of the very real histories of people of color during the revolution (Freire, 2005, p. 74). While *Hamilton* takes up the “public space” which is so necessary for performance activism to thrive in the consciousness of a nationwide audience, and this space includes its media presence beyond the stage, it is still guilty of a tendency towards “utopia” in theatre through this othering (Gielen, 2017, p. 138). It shies away from fully addressing the prevalence of slavery in its narrative. *Hamilton* is a bridge to the white-dominated narratives which preceded it, claiming revolutionary significance while maintaining certain aspects of centrality to make it palatable to the mainstream white populace.