

**“What’d They Miss?”:  
Performing Race in *Hamilton: An American Musical***

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## EXPOSITION

### **“Another immigrant, comin’ up from the bottom”**

*Hamilton: An American Musical* tells the story – slightly embellished and dramatized – of one of the United States’ Founders, Alexander Hamilton, performed by an entirely non-white lead cast. I focus on two main subjects in this paper; first, I respond to criticism the play has received and propose analyzing the Black and brown actors in the chorus and dance troupe as the only potential Black and brown characters in the show. Second, I use the case studies of two 2016 performances of *Hamilton* – one for President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama and schoolchildren in the White House, and one on Broadway that was attended by then-Vice President Elect Mike Pence – and discuss the role of “Black” music genres in political and social activism. Both my analysis of the dance troupe and performance case studies show that *Hamilton* has the potential to create cross-cultural appreciation for national history and Black art forms between Black, brown, and white Americans, regardless of their political affiliations.

Playwright and composer Lin-Manuel Miranda based the musical *Hamilton* on the book “Alexander Hamilton” by Ron Chernow, which is a biography published in 2005. Hamilton was an orphaned immigrant from the island of Nevis, in the Caribbean, a point that Miranda emphasizes multiple times throughout the play. He arrived in New York in 1772, when the U.S. was preparing for a revolution against England. The musical is narrated mostly by Aaron Burr, who led a nearly parallel life to Hamilton in New York, despite their differing political beliefs – both were orphans, young revolutionaries, both became lawyers, and they had children around the same time. The penultimate scene of the musical shows the duel between Burr and Hamilton, in which Hamilton was fatally shot. In the musical, Hamilton makes friends with some

revolutionaries: John Laurens, Hercules Mulligan, and the Marquis de LaFayette. He marries Elizabeth Schuyler (“Eliza” in the play), fosters an infatuation with her sister Angelica, becomes George Washington’s right hand man, and then becomes Secretary of the Treasury and establishes the first banking system in the US. He is at odds with Aaron Burr as well as Thomas Jefferson. An affair with a woman named Maria Reynolds in the second act ends with the infamous “Reynolds Pamphlet,” which Hamilton actually wrote in order to avoid blackmail by Burr, Jefferson, and James Madison, who discovered the payments Hamilton made to James Reynolds, Maria’s husband, in order to keep the affair going. Despite the usual sexism of the “helpless woman” trope in opera and musical theater, Eliza “takes herself out of the narrative” and shuns Hamilton until after their son Philip is killed in a duel. Washington resigns and Jefferson is elected over Burr, with Hamilton’s support. Following the final duel with Burr, Hamilton’s wife Eliza finishes the whole show off in “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?” describing how she, the real Eliza, lived another 50 years and published and organized all of Hamilton’s innumerable writings, interviewed the soldiers who fought with him in the Revolution, raised money for the Washington Monument, established the first orphanage in New York City, and spoke out against slavery.

Broadway shows do not generally give history lessons, nor do they typically have a majority of minority cast members, and their top hits are never rap battles. *Hamilton* has it all, and has won Kennedy Center Honors, Tony awards, and Pulitzer Prizes.

## ACT I

### **“Gotta start a new nation”**

Despite the incredible reception in the first season of the show, there have been several critiques of Miranda and what (who) he chose to include and exclude from the story. The main critique of the play, as outlined in Monteiro’s “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*,” or Herrera’s “Reckoning With America’s Racial Past, Present, and Future in *Hamilton*,” is that despite the Black and brown *actors* in every lead role, the lead roles are entirely white *characters* (Romano & Potter, 2018). Alexander Hamilton himself was not a slave owner, but the Schuylers were. So were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The question about performing this show then becomes this: are we perpetuating the adulation of white men? Specifically, white men who wrote people of color and women out of the country’s constitution?

Faced with this criticism, Miranda agreed that, “Hamilton — although he voiced anti-slavery beliefs — remained complicit in the system” (Bradly, 2020), and went on to acknowledge the shortcomings in his own writing.

...Other than calling out Jefferson on his hypocrisy with regards to slavery in Act 2, (Hamilton) doesn’t really say much else over the course of Act 2. And I think that’s actually pretty honest. He didn’t really do much about it after that. None of them did. None of them did enough. And we say that, too, in the final moments of the song. So that hits differently now because we’re having a conversation, we’re having a real reckoning of how do you uproot an original sin?

And he returned to the “original sin” of slavery in a 2015 New York Times interview with Weinert-Kendt, justifying why he didn’t include anything more about it.

For the question of slavery, which is the great original sin of this country, it’s in the third line of the show. But it’s this thing that keeps getting kicked down the field. Hamilton and Burr were part of the New York Manumission Society, so they were actually very progressive. But there’s only so much time you can spend on it when there’s no result to it.

The third line of the show is: “And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted away / He kept his guard up.” This is a graphic depiction and the emphasis is on *slaughtered* to rhyme with *guard up*, but in that moment there is only one singer on stage, and no one is acting out the imagery behind him. In other moments during the same scene, background dancers are acting the roles described in the verses – Hamilton’s parents arguing, his cousin hanging himself. By “there’s only so much time you can spend on it when there’s no result to it,” Miranda means that abolition can not be significant part of a musical about Alexander Hamilton because although Hamilton’s membership with the NYMS was progressive for his time, he did not spend a significant amount of time or resources actually changing laws regarding slavery. In some way, a brief mention in a few lines of the play represent Hamilton’s awareness of the cause and simultaneous inaction.

The only reference to an on-stage black person is in the scene of Thomas Jefferson in Monticello. There are dancers who no doubt represent enslaved people mopping the floor, and Jefferson names one of them in the line “There’s a letter on my desk from the president / Haven’t even put my bag down yet / Sally! Be a lamb, darlin’, won’t you open it?” This is a direct nod to Sally Hemings, who was the enslaved woman he repeatedly raped and had six children with

(Danielle, 2017). The afroed dancer twirls her way over to Jefferson with a smile and presents the letter with a flourish. Critical historian Monteiro (2018) pointed out that, “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” (p. 64). Monteiro and other historians such as Romano and Potter (2018) see Miranda’s failure to point out and name these innumerable enslaved people, an everyday sight and part of life in late-eighteenth-century America, as a failure to include them at all. Miranda even chose to cut a third rap battle between Hamilton and Jefferson from the final version of the play, in which they debated a Quaker abolitionist resolution and Hamilton again named Sally Hemings.

I believe there is another way of reading race in *Hamilton*. There are almost always Black and brown bodies onstage as the chorus and dancers, any of whom could be read as a background enslaved character and thus as an actually more realistic presentation of people in the background. I will use two specific scenes that illustrate this.

### **“At a revel with some rebels on a hot night”**

In the scene “A Winter’s Ball,” Eliza is singing her solo introduction song, “Helpless.” She stands center stage with her sisters. Four couples dance in a circle around them, with only slight changes from the usual dance troupe costumes of cream colored leggings, sleeveless bodices, and high boots. The women have additional ball gown skirts and the men wear blue revolutionary coats with red trim. The dance is seemingly based on traditional ballroom dancing, supplemented with a few breakdance moments. All the dancers sing as a chorus throughout the scene while Washington, Burr, and Mulligan come from offstage to partner with the Schuyler sisters briefly. Mulligan and Peggy join the dancers, while Angelica and Eliza split off again and

Hamilton walks in, narrated by Eliza's song. Throughout the scene, the dancing continues with elements of swing, contradance, and hip hop. Once Angelica leads Hamilton to the right side of the stage to introduce him to Eliza, the dancers form a line on the left side of the stage and resume dancing. The song continues while the dancers leave and Eliza narrates her engagement to Hamilton, and eventually the women return to the stage to prepare Eliza for her wedding, followed by the men who immediately find their partners again and return to the dance and chorus. At the end of the song, the couples place themselves as guests and create an aisle that the wedding party walks up, and the final moment of the song is a kiss between Hamilton and Eliza before the music cuts. The introduction to the next song begins, and the men twirl upstage before they walk back with trays of drinks and pass them to the assembled guests while Laurens drunkenly introduces Angelica to center stage for a speech. Laurens has a brief piano introduction and passes a glass to Angelica, and by the time he has finished, the men in the chorus have placed the trays on a table upstage and have returned to their dance partners, as they join in the song and toast the bride and groom with Angelica. It would be socially unacceptable for guests, even soldiers, to serve anything at the wedding of a wealthy woman, so therefore I suggest that in the 8 bars of Laurens's link the soldier guests become enslaved servants and return to guests.

The website Slavery in New York posits that about 20 percent of the population in New York City during Hamilton's lifetime were enslaved and 41 percent of all households in the city held enslaved people, the majority of whom did the shopping and errands within the city. It is likely, therefore, that the racial makeup of people in the streets on any given day would look very similar to the dance troupe in the background of *Hamilton*. Their fluidity of character, of being whatever they need to be to keep the scene going and the staging moving, could easily be

compared with the role that enslaved people had in cities; running errands, serving guests, cleaning, carrying luggage, accompanying children, and on and on.

**“Lookin’ at the rolling fields, I can’t believe that we are free”**

According to a chart showing the statistics of slavery created by Weber State University, when Jefferson returned from France in 1789, 40 percent of the population in Virginia were enslaved. Jefferson owned four plantations, but he himself lived mostly at Monticello in Virginia. In his lifetime he had 607 enslaved people, most of whom were “inherited” from his father and marriage to his wife. In the first *Hamilton* rap battle, Jefferson raps about “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness / We fought for these ideals, we shouldn’t settle for less / These are wise words, enterprising men quote ‘em / Don’t act surprised you guys, ‘cause I wrote ‘em,” quoting Jefferson’s contribution to the Declaration of Independence, by which he meant life and liberty *for white men*, and the pursuit of happiness *for white people*.

At the beginning of Act II, Thomas Jefferson returns to Monticello from his ambassadorial position in France. Jefferson’s character is the most directly linked to slavery in this musical, with Hamilton calling him out in their first rap battle; “A civics lesson from a slaver, hey neighbor / Your debts are paid 'cause 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.” Act II begins with Hamilton hurrying across the stage behind Burr, who is narrating again, interacting with strategically placed dancers. Burr hands a dancer a set of white gloves and begins to introduce Thomas Jefferson. The entire dance troupe then immediately tug on white gloves and the women begin to dance a combination of jazz and ballet, while the men roll Jefferson into Monticello on a moving staircase. Once the staircase has stopped and Jefferson is on his way down, most of the



dancers kneel and begin to mop the floor before lining up to welcome him home. The music becomes a pseudo-blues progression and Jefferson tosses his cane to a waiting man, who polishes it and takes it offstage, returning with a letter on a tray. Once Jefferson reads the letter from Washington requesting him in New York, two of the dancers become luggage porters and help roll the staircase again, then line up and melt into background choreography.

### **“One more thing”**

“A Winter’s Ball” and “Thomas Jefferson’s Coming Home” are just two scenes that I have chosen to analyze fully. Throughout the show, the chorus on stage helps set the scene and move the plot along without a single mention by the characters or dialogue. In the very first scene of Act I, the dancers act out the narrative, representing Hamilton’s parents and cousin, then do stylistic choreography, and then become dock workers and porters – the majority of whom were likely enslaved. In “Non-stop” when Hamilton and Burr are presenting in court, nine dancers bring a table and chairs on stage and four of them sit down, becoming witnesses at the trial. The others stand behind the chairs and during a pause in the action they lean over to speak with the witnesses, effectively attending to them as enslaved personal servants would. Even the British soldiers, in the red coats with rifles, could be seen as previously enslaved men, as an estimated 20,000 enslaved men joined the British army in hopes that they would earn freedom after the war (Pybus, 2005).

## INTERMISSION

### **“Are you aware that we’re making history?”**

Like *Porgy and Bess* in the 1930s, *Hamilton* was wildly progressive for its time in 2016, and was arguably the most unifying thing that spanned Obama and Trump’s presidencies. If a rapped, hip-hop musical about the Founders can garner praise from such a politically diverse cast of characters as Barack and Michelle Obama, Dick Cheney, Rupert Murdoch, Hillary Clinton, Mike Pence, and Bill O’Reilly, what does this say about the future of America and the potential for activism through art? Ironically, some of the staunchest fighters against employing Critical Race Theory in school curriculum have nothing but appreciation for *Hamilton*, and have said nothing against it being used to teach American History in classrooms. According to the anti-CRT rules, entire scenes would have to be cut or drastically altered simply because they mention race – Hamilton’s verses in “The World Turned Upside Down” (“Laurens is in South Carolina, redefining bravery / We’ll never be free until we end slavery”), as well as John Adams’s swipe at Hamilton which is written as the breaking point that leads to Hamilton’s self-destruction (“Adams fires Hamilton, privately calls him ‘Creole bastard’ in his taunts / Hamilton publishes his response”) are only two of several examples.

The two characters whose whiteness is elevated are King George III and Samuel Seabury, a loyalist. Both Seabury’s “Free Thoughts on the Continental Congress” song and King George’s cameos are sung in comical British accents and accompanied by harpsichord; standing alone on a box, Seabury’s accompaniment is delicate and Bach étude-esque, while King George’s solo appearance on stage begins with piano and becomes a harpsichord-heavy, faux Elton John, soft rock ’70s aria that is amusingly out of step with the rest of the R&B and hip hop in the rest of the

show. The use of harpsichord as well as costuming – Seabury wears a black judge’s gown and a cravat, King George wears a red silk ensemble complete with a fur-lined cape and white wig – creates the perfect satirical image of a comedically pathetic white colonizer. These characterizations are in direct contrast with the “heroes” of the story, who are self-characterized as “young, scrappy, and hungry,” belting hip hop and rapping their way through revolution accompanied by a strong background cast.

Of course, the people who directly benefit from the success of the musical – the lead performers in the show – have a stake in proving the worth of the show, so their words could be taken with a pinch of salt. But according to a Disney+ filmed interview titled “History Has Its Eyes on You” with Robin Roberts, even before he had considered auditioning for the show, Leslie Odom Jr. (Aaron Burr) saw a version of the first act and described his experience. “There were four men of color on the stage, singing about friendship and brotherhood, and I had never seen an image like that in my life. And so to me, that *was* the revolution...that image alone made the piece worthy.” The “revolution” was not just a personal one, however. The interview with Roberts was done after the May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd, and included Harvard Law professor Annette Gordon-Reed who stated “We’re in a different moment now, watching *Hamilton* after the death of George Floyd.” In response to questions about what that meant for the actors, Okieriete "Oak" Onaodowan (James Madison) says what helped him after watching the video of the murder was remembering “I am a part of a project that urges people to speak out for the America that they wish to see, and to fight as hard as they can to make that America a reality.” Daveed Diggs (Thomas Jefferson) agreed: “If you get this sense of patriotism that I do from watching it, if you’re prideful about America, and we are the bodies that you see performing America, you then have a responsibility to go make that America exist, because it

doesn't and it didn't then." He goes on to say that watching the show is an example of "how to hold your country accountable," before describing how his life is valued now, after being in Hamilton, but how the week before the show started a white police officer threw him against a fence.

## ACT II

*Hamilton* was used as a platform for political messaging on a more official scale twice in 2016. The first was in March, when the original cast was invited for a workshop and performance at the White House by the Obamas, and the second was in November, when Mike Pence attended a show and the Broadway cast delivered a speech to him after the bows. I have chosen to compare these performances because of the significant roles each administration has had on race relations in the US.

### **"Welcome to the present, we're running a real nation"**

The cast did a selection of songs at the White House as part of an event the First Family organized, with an educational part for school kids and a performance for the Obamas, the Bidens, and other prominent statespeople as well as students. The performance, which was filmed and put on the Black Alliance website, was wildly different from a Broadway production in that there were no costumes, dancers, or staging. Instead, the cast sang into set microphones with their pit band in front of the gold curtains in the East Room, a spacious ballroom in the White House. For the East Room performance, hundreds of audience members sat directly in front of the singers. Barack and Michelle Obama were front and center, with Marian Robinson

(Michelle's mother), and Joe and Jill Biden. Fittingly, the most prominent artwork in the East Room is a portrait of George Washington. The *Hamilton* performance took place on March 14th of 2016. The final Republican primary debate was March 10th, and by the 14th it had become clear that Trump was the front runner. Liberal spirits at the White House, in the cast, and across the country were not high.

The four selected songs were the opening number, "Alexander Hamilton," the introduction of Elizabeth and Angelica (and Peggy) Schuyler aptly called "The Schuyler Sisters," a scene in which Hamilton meets his three revolutionist friends and they join in a call to arms in the song "My Shot," and George Washington's dictation of his final letter to the American people as president, "One Last Time." The image of the Black first president singing to the first Black president about the invention of the peaceful transfer of power only became more poignant after the chaotic election in 2020, followed by Trump's instigation of the white supremacist-led January 6th attempted coup at the Capitol Building in 2021.

There are a few performative moments that don't happen in the staged version – the beatboxing for "My Shot" is made more prominent as the only percussion, whereas in the staged performance the characters of Mulligan and Laurens pound rhythmically on a table. Miranda and Philippa Soo (Eliza) are the only non-black singers, though the mostly white pit band is visible without the pit. The curse words are not censored, and the singers cheer each other on as usual, which becomes more obvious outside of an individually-mic'd stage performance. They also interact with the singers "off stage" to the side as well as with the Obamas. At one point, in a break of character, Miranda steps away from the mic so he can laugh at Diggs's French accent, when usually it's a serious and staged moment of the play.

In the final song, “One Last Time,” Christopher Jackson (Washington) took his microphone off the stand and moved around as freely as he could. After the introduction of the tune, Washington dictates a resignation letter to Hamilton, who begins to recite it before Washington joins him in a recitativo-style, minimally-accompanied climbing melody. The “verse” is actually George Washington’s real life resignation letter, which is followed by the chorus singing “George Washington’s going home,” in a quieter parody of “Thomas Jefferson’s coming home” from earlier in the play. At this point in the official video of the White House performance, two Black women in the chorus began to cry, as well as Mrs. Robinson. Following the song, President Obama stood and spoke, thanking the cast for “teaching [him] how to say goodbye.”

This was not the only time “One Last Time” was relevant in the Obama administration. Bryan Terrel Clark was cast as George Washington in the Broadway cast of *Hamilton*, debuting January 10th, 2017, the same night that Obama gave his farewell address at the White House. “I was aware,” Clark said on the *Day 6* podcast, “that Obama was going to be giving the address around the time I was singing ‘One Last Time.’”

### **“Welcome...to the Adams Administration”**

On November 18th, 2016, ten days after Donald Trump was elected president, Vice President-elect Mike Pence saw *Hamilton* on Broadway. He was booed when he got to the theater, and then he watched a production with Javier Muñoz as Hamilton – Muñoz is openly gay and HIV positive. At the end of the show, the cast lined up for bows, and then addressed Pence as he was leaving. Crew members not wearing costumes joined the line up, and the man who played Burr, Brandon Victor Dixon, read prepared lines from a piece of paper:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us tonight. You know, we had a guest in the audience this evening... Vice President-elect Pence, I see you walking out, but I hope you will hear us just a few more moments... We have a message for you, sir, and we hope that you will hear us out... Vice President-elect Pence, we welcome you and we truly thank you for joining us here at 'Hamilton: An American Musical.' We really do. We, sir, we are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us. All of us. Again, we truly thank you for sharing this show, this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men, women, of different colors, creeds, and orientations. (Mele & Healy, 2016)

Predictably, then-President-Elect Trump took to Twitter and disparaged the cast for addressing Pence. Pence himself, however, spoke on Fox News Sunday, saying of the performance, "It was a real joy to be there. When we arrived we heard a few boos, and we heard some cheers. I nudged my kids and reminded them that is what freedom sounds like" (Bradner, 2016). With his famously white, conservative Christian politics, it is surprising that he described the show as "...an incredible production" with "incredibly talented people," but it also shows the importance that politicians, especially those in the Trump administration, place on history above artists. It did not matter to Pence that Muñoz is the epitome of what Pence thinks is wrong in the world, but it did matter that his children learn about the founding of America. To Trump, of course, all that mattered was that his future administration had been "harassed" by the cast of a "highly overrated" show.

Presidential performances and addresses are not the only political messaging *Hamilton* has been a part of. In October of 2020, “The Room Where It Happens” was released on YouTube in collaboration with IWillVote.com, a full 5:10 minute zoom-room recording from 18 cast members. Some of them fill out absentee ballots, interspersed with images of early voting booths. Some wear political shirts, and Geoffrey Groff (King Charles III) wore a handmade Biden/Harris crown. The video starts with a clip of now-President Biden telling people to vote, underlain with the bassline and beat of the song, and ends with a message from now-Vice President Harris about how important voting is.

In Tracy McMullen’s review of “Sounding Race in Rap Songs,” she writes that “rap music has remained an overt signifier of Blackness, not just lyrically and visually, but sonically.” This “overt signifier” is used by Miranda to give his previously white characters a strong validity in their embodied Blackness. In 2021 a study for *Youth and Society* was done that “examined associations between Black youth’s engagement with hip-hop culture and their sociopolitical development,” and showed that “Black youth who consumed more hip-hop media and who interacted with artists on social media had more agency to address racism and reported engaging in more racial-justice activism.” Rap and hip hop have been used for political commentary and social justice issues for decades, from NWA’s “Fuck Tha Police” in 1988 to Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” in 2015. By composing *Hamilton* as a hip hop musical, Miranda created a new artistic platform for political activism in a time when people in the United States, especially young people, were consuming more popular culture and becoming more invested in politics than in living memory.



## CURTAIN CALL

### **“Who tells your story?”**

Daveed Diggs, Christopher Jackson, and Leslie Odom Jr. have all commented on the power they see in the casting of *Hamilton*. When asked about the casting in a 2015 interview with Kathryn Lurie, Odom said, “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.” Jackson pointed out that, “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” (Mead, 2015). And Diggs agreed, saying that he personally, “...walked out of the show with a sense of ownership over American history. Part of it is seeing brown bodies play these people” (Monteiro, 2018).

I have shown that the presence of the background dance troupe and chorus that keep the cogs running in the production can be seen as the thousands of enslaved people who kept the cogs running in the early years of post-revolution American society. In 2016, it was crucial to get young people invested in politics and to show resistance against the rampant racism that an incoming Trump administration was about to inspire. Miranda responded to the needs of the moment by making Hamilton’s status as an immigrant a significant part of his identity, and he showed Black and brown people intimately involved with American history by casting them as the Founders. President Obama, after the performance in the White House, concluded that, “the show reminds us that this nation was built by more than just a few great men and that it is an inheritance that belongs to all of us...It is a story for all of us, and about all of us.”

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