

Hamilton as an Educational Phenomenon

Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical* is, without doubt, a cultural phenomenon- theatrically and culturally. *Hamilton* is unique as a Broadway musical because it is narrated mostly through rap and hip hop- a non-traditional genre for musicals. Miranda specifically choose to tell the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of America's Founding Fathers, using hip hop because he felt that the musical genre exemplified the Founding Father. This genre is illustrates the current youth culture which has become a useful tool for educators of American History as they teach young students. The blending of modern musical influences and a historical story in popular format (a Broadway musical) engaged people with history and is successful in educating students of American History. Historical texts encourage kids to analyze how things used to be and can compare the past to their modern lives. This can spark a desire in children and teenagers to apply the past to the present based on what they learned while engaging in the particular media. Hamilton as a historical figure and as a character within the musical, is a person of ambition and drive - which serves as an aspirational figure for many young viewers. For all of these reasons, Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* has revitalized education and a youthful interest in Early American history by presenting the content on a platform that is fresh and relatable to younger audiences.

There are many critics that claim that Hamilton is a part of a growing trend that has been coined "Founders Chic". There have been movies, like *the Patriot*, biographies and books, like the Alexander Hamilton Biography by Ron Chernow that the musical was based off of, and even dolls like the American Girl Doll collection that contribute to this claim of a trend of bringing Revolutionary War relics back to the public's attention. In their essay, "Hamilton as Founder's Chic", David Waldstreicher and Jeffrey L. Pasley, identify four main characteristics of Founder's Chic: an exuberant amount of patriotism and celebration of the founding era, an effort to humanize the Founding Fathers to identify their personalities and character, an outwardly establishment

attitude, and an element of relatability that allows modern participants to identify with the Founding Father's and relate modern ideas and concepts. *Hamilton* fits all of these indicators. Creators of Founder's Chic material, Waldstreicher and Pasley argue, attempt to embody the entire America spirit in the characters of the Founding Fathers- and although they attempt to reveal the flaws of the Fathers, they do not come clean about every negative traits, essentially glossing over the heinous parts. This is potentially problematic for *Hamilton* because as a musical, Miranda sought to include everyone in the spirit and history of America. But if one is embodying the entire essence of America life in the white, aristocratic, male elite that were the Founding Fathers, minority races, women,, children, and the poor and denied access to their claim in the America as it is. However, *Hamilton* seeks to rectify the mistakes that previous example of Founder's Chic have fallen victim to. As stated, Miranda specifically casted talented individuals of all ethnicities, which gave actors and viewers alike a sense of ownership over American history. *Hamilton* as a musical is the first instalment in the Founders Chic trend to take the world by storm and create a cultural revolution and reaches down to youth and adults alike and is interesting and relatable to the popular market, and not just the academic community. However, much like other installments of Founder Chic phenomena, *Hamilton* as a musical glosses over the historical tragedies of the American Revolution. In her essay, "America's Racial Past Present and Future", Patricia Herrera, a first generation Latina-American expresses her shock and confusion when her children, devout *Hamilton* fans, wanted to be characters from *Hamilton* for Halloween. Initially excited that her children identified with Hamilton's story as an immigrant and his role in the founding, Herrera experienced dissonance at the thought of her daughter dressing up as Angelica Schuyler, a slave owner- a detail that is never mentioned in the musical. The musical also omits Alexander Hamilton's role in the Alien and Sedition acts which were against increased immigration into America. Although Hamilton is not portrayed as a perfect historical figure- his adultery and anger management are featured- the musical is largely a favorable portrayal of Alexander Hamilton even though he was not always a favorable person historically. This

potentially causes problems in that it teaches people an inaccurate picture of American history. However, despite the inaccuracies, Hamilton still encourages people of all ages to interact with history in ways they have not previously. *Hamilton* serves as springboard for those interested to delve deeper into history and find out more on their own.

When Lin Manuel Miranda performed at the White House in the first months of President Obama's administration, he started his performance saying "I am writing a musical about a man who I think exemplifies the essence of hip hop - Alexander Hamilton." Miranda explains this statement in the book *Hamilton: the American Revolution*, saying that in his eyes, Alexander Hamilton was "opinionated, hyper-vocal, always on the move" and that hip-hop is "the music of ambition, the soundtrack of defiance" (*the Revolution*, 21). Using these characterizations, Hamilton and hip-hop indeed compliment each other well. Although Hamilton the character is indeed an ambitious person, constantly "writing like he's running out of time" and intent on leaving a legacy after he is gone, he also has insecurities. In one of the first songs of the first act, *My Shot*, a nineteen year old Hamilton meets his eventual friends and fellow soldiers for the first time; Lafayette, Laurens, and Mulligan. After giving a monologue exclaiming "Give me a position, show me where the ammunition is," Hamilton back tracks saying,

"Oh, am I talkin' too loud?"

Sometimes I get over excited, shoot off at the mouth

I never had a group of friends before

I promise that I'll make y'all proud"

(My Shot)

This initial excitement and enthusiasm followed by a more cautious humbling statement is commonplace with children and teens. In high school, a student's primary social goal is to fit in and

find friends. At nineteen, Alexander is not much older than today's high schoolers and is full of ambition but has doubts about his place in his new group of friends. Not being legal adults, teenagers are also frequently brushed off by more grown up adults, even if they have ideas that could be beneficial. Hamilton the character shows that being "nineteen, but my mind is older" (*My Shot*) did not hold him back from leaving his legacy, and neither did being financially disadvantaged, an orphan, or an immigrant. Despite all these disadvantages, Hamilton is ultimately able to have a say in the way the new American government will be established. High school students' opinions and thoughts are often disregarded and dismissed as not serious- teachers, parents and other various adults may claim that at sixteen or seventeen, high schoolers are not old enough to make decisions or have valid thoughts. This frequent dismissal can lead to young students doubting themselves and speaking up less and less as they continue their educations. But Alexander Hamilton, to an insecure quiet high schooler and anyone else, represents defiance and ambition. Alexander was only nineteen when the Declaration of Independence was signed and fourteen when he arrived in America alone. He talked loud until he was heard, he wrote fast and non-stop. Hamilton was loud and outgoing, someone outspoken, outgoing kids can identify with and find affirmation that their thoughts do matter, as well as someone that quieter and more reserved kids can aspire up to. Going even further, Alexander provides an example to disadvantaged, immigrant kids that they can make their way in the world.

In addition to the characters being influential to young listeners, the casting and genre of the musical are incredibly pertinent to the impact it has on its listeners and viewers. The diverse cast includes African Americans, Latinx and Asian American actors and actresses, all casting choices that were intentionally made by Miranda and the rest of the production team. Miranda says that the musical is telling the story of "America then told by America now" (*the Revolution*, 33) due to the multiracial cast which is representative of a multiracial and multicultural America. Daveed Diggs,

who played Marquis Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson in the musical, explained that “I walked out of the show with a sense of ownership over American history. Part of it is seeing brown bodies play these people” (Smithsonian). The first Alexander Hamilton was played by the musical’s mastermind, Lin Manuel Miranda whose father emigrated from Puerto Rico. Hamilton is currently being played by Michael Luwoye whose parents emigrated from Nigeria before settling in Alabama. The musical version Alexander Hamilton is a model of a successful immigration story, coming from nothing and rising up and to help establish the country. Additionally, the character Lafayette was an immigrant who was involved in two political revolutions, the American and the French. The spirit of the immigrant is exemplified not only in the lyrics of the musical- in the song Yorktown, Lafayette and Hamilton sing together, “Immigrants, we get the job done” (*Yorktown*) - and the repetition of Hamilton’s immigrant status throughout, but also in the casting of the musical with individuals like Miranda and Luwoye. Miranda states that Alexander Hamilton is “the porotype for millions of men and women who followed him and continue to arrive today” (*the Revolution*, 14) and I would argue that the actors as well and serve as a beacon of inspiration from incoming immigrants and other disadvantaged individuals, including youths, especially since a growing percent of future generations will be immigrants or people of color.

As mentioned previously, Miranda states that rap and hip-hop utilized in Hamilton is the “music of ambition, the soundtrack of defiance” (*the Revolution*, 21). Using this musical genre specifically is relatable with a young generation. When high school history teacher Jim Cullen played *Helpless* for his history class, he thought he was going to be introducing his students to something new that he had stumbled upon. What he didn’t expect was for nearly the whole class to burst into song, knowing every lyric, singing along to the musical number from Hamilton. This shows how Hamilton is effective in reaching the younger generations, even to students that were not interested in Broadway, it was the newness and ambition of the lyrics and cultural blend that intrigued and

enraptured the students. Mr. Cullen, in his essay, *Minding the Gap: Teaching Hamilton*, explains that there is a generational gap between him and his students which also leads to an information gap. Clearly, as students, they lack knowledge simply because they haven't been taught it yet but teachers also have to bridge a cultural divide. Mr. Cullen uses the example of not comprehending the issue of creating credit during the first few years of our country if you have never owned a credit card, like the majority of high school students. Mr. Cullen describes history classes as a "meta-class"- "It is never simply a matter of the stated topic at hand," (Cullen, 252) it also involves the cultural and ideological issues surrounding the issue, which *Hamilton*, Mr. Cullen says, helps him fill the youthful blank slate of cultural information his students have: "the very nature of the show... has an instinct for bridging communities... the musical dramatizes its hybrid existence and that of the American experience generally" (Cullen, 254). Teachers wish to teach an appreciation of the workings on the American society- *Hamilton's* cast shows a reclaiming of American history by everyone who lives in today's American and the biography and musical focuses on a historical moment of the Revolution and construction of our country and the ideological positions surrounding the time period and how they might be applied to today. In his notes on *The Cabinet Battle*, Lin Manuel Miranda comments that he "articulated the perspectives of these men in a way that feels contemporary" (*the Revolution*, 161) specifically regarding to the lines "we create. You just want to move our money around" when referring to paying off states debt that would unequally advantage New York over Virginia and "they don't have a plan, they just hate mine" which is reminiscent of modern day polarization in Congress. Claire Bond Potter, in an article with the Smithsonian, says that today's increased interest in revolutionary history stems from turbulence in current day politics because makes people look back to the roots of our government which there is a comfort in. Today's liberals Americans see the American Revolution as organic and constantly evolving, that the revolution was flawed an incomplete and is still being worked on today compared to conservatives who see it as essentialist an absolute (Waldstreicher, 168). Bond Potter argues that because the contemporary political world is so

fractured, even with how we view the Revolution, the American Revolution is familiar and people can look back on how the original Americans went about consolidating their disagreements to form a functioning government. Political tension is very real in our country as it was during the founding of our nation but as they saying goes, we look to past to prepare for the future.

Mr. Cullen specifically was privileged because the school he teaches at is a progressive school that is devoted to social activism and the nature of his teaching environment was an asset to him in bridging the cultural and intellectual gap he mentions in his essay. Not all teachers will have the advantages Mr. Cullen had in his school but this does not mean other teachers would be unable to make the culturally connection with their student, specifically using *Hamilton*. In the article “Global Ill-Literacies”, author H. Samy Alim writes that “American educational institutions themselves [are] illiterate, that is, unable to read and meet the needs of marginalized youth” (Alim, 122). What Alim means by this is that young students speak a different “language” than their teacher because we live in an era of complex linguistics. The language of youth is represented in hip-hop music because it “index[es] youth’s attempts to negotiate their ever-changing and fluid realities” (Alim, 123). Hip hop is not considered to be in line with socially accepted ideas, socially acceptable meaning the middle to upper class society, and frequently disrupts the middle-class norms. It often challenges political institutions and race relations that brings up tension between the artists and disapproving listeners but relates to young marginalized listeners. Therefore, hip hop “can help develop a meta-literacy in students for the purposes of raising their social consciousness” (Alim, 140) and help teachers “decode student’s lived experiences and identifies in an era of culturally and linguistically complex classrooms” (Alim, 122). Students, when using hip hop in schools, are being encouraged to use language format they are most comfortable with. In regards to *Hamilton*, they are to discuss *Hamilton* itself, American history and today’s culture in their own language, breaking the educational boundaries and working within their own cultural moment.

Lastly I would like to talk about the content of the musical that makes it useful to learn about history. Hamilton producer Jeffrey Seller and Hamilton creator Lin-Manuel Miranda, The Rockefeller Foundation, the NYC Department of Education, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute founded the Hamilton Education Program the same year as the musical hit Broadway. This programs functions by supplementing high school history classes' curriculum that gives a run-down of various people, events and documents that were important to the Revolutionary War Era. The curriculum also goes into depth about the primary sources planted directly in the musical. The HEP's website says that, "This innovative program integrating history and performing arts allows teachers to bring American history to the classroom in a new way and helps students find their own connections to the founding era" all before they even see the show while on tour. The content of the songs itself gives historical facts, not just a general overview of Hamilton's life. For example, the song *Cabinet Battle #1*, the arguments for and against a national bank are laid out in a rap battle. This informal and fun way of learning the details of one of the very first cabinet meetings of our national and a dramatized edition of how politics work, indubitably aids students with remembering and applying this information in the future, especially when economic issues like the one being discussed in the song are still being argued over today. Several songs, including the *Election of 1800*, *What'd I Miss*, and *Yorktown* all begin with the year that corresponds to the historical event they are about. This obvious indicator places the listener directly in the time line of historical events that would be beneficial to learning about such events in history class. In the song *When the World Was Wide Enough*, Burr steps out address the crowd directly and tells them "they won't teach you this in your history classes" when referring to very specific details of his duel with Hamilton.

Hamilton: An American Musical teaches people not only about American history, but also about today's culture and encourages those coming of age in our nation to be outspoken and proud. As the climax of a growing trend revolving around the Revolutionary War, Lin Manuel Miranda took

what we knew about history and flipped it on its head, putting it to hip hop and rap, allowing anyone of age and ethnicity a part in reclaiming American history and making it their own story. Despite the historical inaccuracies and omissions in the musical, *Hamilton: An American Musical* has engaged generations of people from all walks of life- including all political parties- with hip hop culture and American history.

Works Cited

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