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Winner of the The English Department Award

# Power Struggles and Grand Narratives

Greg W. Childs

**L**in Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* has become one of the most widely praised works of art in recent memory. Both critics and audience members have fallen in love with this retelling of the founding of America. The accolades and positive responses have come from all corners, even politicians running the gambit from president Barack Obama to vice president Mike Pence. The way that *Hamilton* taps into cultural discourse surrounding race and the founding of America leaves almost all who see it with a positive impression. The founding of America that *Hamilton* addresses, through the story of oft-forgotten founding father Alexander Hamilton, is the keystone of the American legend, and held in the highest of regard by those who identify with the sanitized, white-centric narrative of American history. This narrative places white people at the center of the historical universe, and conveniently forgets that people of color—outside of possibly Crispus Attucks—existed at all during the revolution.

This is what makes *Hamilton* into such an interesting case, as it tells the same American legend that has been told for years, with the only change being that the cast of the musical is almost entirely made up of people of color. This change has been the subject of much praise, because it acts both as a show of diversity and, simultaneously, a show of assimilation, and most viewers will find one of these two praiseworthy. This simple fact is the key to *Hamilton's* almost universal popularity. The play gives the mainstream culture license to keep ignoring the historical narratives that actually belong to people of color, and allows white viewers to be entertained by subject matter containing race, without having to truly face their own role in the sordid history of race in America. *Hamilton's* telling of the story also perpetuates the idea of America as largely innocent and moral, and helps further insulate the American psyche from any real level of self-reflection.

The fact that *Hamilton* is able to function as art that, at the same time, celebrates diversity and assimilation, is what lends it such wide appeal. The casting of almost entirely people of color gives the show a surface level look of diversity, but looking a little deeper, it is plain to see that this appearance is only skin deep. Lyra Monteiro addressed the casting in her article “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*”: “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.” Although the people playing the roles look different, the roles themselves are unchanged. *Hamilton* is, in the end, the same story that has been told and retold, and molded into the legend of the founding of America. James Baldwin, novelist and social critic, wrote about Black actors playing white roles, and the cost he saw in this protrait: “What is being attempted is a way of involving, or incorporating, the black face into the national fantasy in such a way that the fantasy will be left unchanged and the social structure left untouched” (108). Many of the stories in the mainstream discourse surrounding the history of America—the revolution, the expansion into the west—have been told in a way that places the “great white men” they center on as heroes to be respected and emulated. *Hamilton* does not step outside of this mainstream narrative. It’s the same fantasy that has lived in the American mind for years. As less reassuring stories of slavery and genocide have become more and more openly acknowledged as part of the American past, it is not surprising that *Hamilton*, a work of art that gives the appearance of bridging the gap between the reassuring old narrative and the upsetting new ones, would become so popular.

Over the last few decades, there has been some change in the telling and teaching of American history to acknowledge a wider range of narratives. This change has become upsetting to people who believe that having more than one narrative of American history is detrimental to the nation as a whole. *Hamilton* addresses this fear by being inclusive of people of color, who have been historically excluded, but it also holds those people’s narratives from the revolutionary era at arms length. What is absent from the play is the fact that America was never a white nation, and that the American experience has always been a multi-ethnic experience. If not for the choice to cast people of color in the roles of historically white people, there would be no people of color in *Hamilton*. The presentation of the musical makes it seem as though people of color have joined the old, white-centric, narrative. This in turn assures white viewers that we, as a nation, have moved past the need for multiple historical narratives, and that people of color have been welcomed into the narrative that has excluded them for years.

Conservative columnist David Brooks argued that as American education begins to give a more all encompassing picture of the history of America, what is needed is unifying story, like *Hamilton*: “Today’s students get steeped in American tales of genocide, slavery, oppression and segregation. American history is taught less as a progressively realized grand narrative and more as a series of power conflicts between oppressor and oppressed.” This argument, that American history is better taught as a “grand narrative” assumes that all populations in the history of America have participated equally in said narrative. American history is a history of “power conflicts between oppressor and oppressed.” Students are “steeped” in these stories because America’s history is steeped in them. James Baldwin wrote: “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America, and it is not a pretty story” (95). This is a radically different way to frame the history of America, and it stands in stark contrast to Brooks. There can be no meaningful American history without including all Americans, and Brooks’ “grand narrative” speaks only to the white population. Reframing the story of America as the story of African Americans in America forces white Americans to see more than just themselves in the history of the country. This is something that, perhaps understandably, many white people are resistant to, as it not only challenges their place at the center of the historical universe, it also challenges their place as the heroes of the American Saga.

The songs that make up *Hamilton* rarely reference race, and when they do it feels removed, and the references to slavery—the main way the show talks about race—make it seem as though slavery is only happening in other places, the same way they have always been in the founding story. The first time *Hamilton* addresses slavery is in the opening song of the musical, titled “Alexander Hamilton.” The song is an introduction of Hamilton himself, and covers his childhood and adolescence in just a few verses. The song is outside of the time and space of the rest of the narrative, with different cast members stepping in and singing the different verses. There is no effort made to link the song to any one time and place, and the sense is that it is only a narration to open the play:

[LAURENS]

By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter

[JEFFERSON]

And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted

Away across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up

Inside, he was longing for something to be a part of (Miranda).

These lines bring up slavery, but they reference it within the context of who Hamilton is, and serve to build his character, not to actually make the audience think about slavery as part of the world of the musical. It also makes it seem far away, in the Caribbean, not in America. This does almost

nothing to establish the fact that slavery is part of the world of the musical, as the musical is not set in the Caribbean. Slavery seems far off and removed, like it is not part of the history of the American Revolution, and is taking place instead in other, far off lands. By placing this reference to slavery in the opening song, Miranda is able to both give his version of Hamilton a motivation to disdain the practice of slavery, but also keeps slavery at a distance. Keeping slavery at a safe distance is the same trick that the mainstream narrative of the revolution has always played, slavery is allowed to exist, just not in the same place as the story of the war for freedom.

The song in *Hamilton* that most openly and directly references slavery is “Cabinet Battle #1,” but even this song works to create distance between slavery on one hand, and Hamilton and the north on the other. In the song, Hamilton and Jefferson engage in an argument over Hamilton’s banking system. Hamilton defends his plan by pointing out the fact that Jefferson is only objecting because the southern states rely on the labor of slaves to pay their debts:

[HAMILTON]

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).

A distinct divide is being cut between the north and south, with the north cast as enlightened and forward thinking, and the south as backward and racist. As with “Alexander Hamilton,” slavery is referenced as happening far away from the world the musical is taking place in, first in the Caribbean and then in the American south. The events of the story are allowed to play out in the same idealized way they have in the American narrative for years, with the founders and their armies as the oppressed, and the royals as oppressors, with no thought given to anyone who fell outside of that paradigm. These songs work to distance and obscure the history and reality of slavery and oppression in revolutionary America, and when this combined with the cast of people of color playing the roles of all white historical figures, what is left is a clever reimagining of the mainstream historical narrative. Instead of getting white viewers to acknowledge the struggles that those outside of their own narrative face, it allows them to think that oppressed groups have joined the white historical narrative, and in doing so ending any need for whites to reconsider their position at the center of the historical universe. James Baldwin explained this need to disassociate from any narrative outside of the mainstream:

White people are astounded by Birmingham. Black people aren’t. White people are endlessly demanding to be reassured that Birmingham is

really on Mars. They don't want to believe, much less act on the belief, that what is happening in Birmingham is happening all over the country. They don't want to realize that there is not one step, morally or actually, between Birmingham and Los Angeles (34).

The white population has never wanted to face the fact that slavery and its legacy were and are not confined to places like Birmingham. *Hamilton* tells the story of the revolution from New York, a place that in the mainstream historical narrative is not closely associated with slavery. This setting gives the audience permission to go on believing that what was happening in the south at the time was not happening in New York. It continues playing into the compartmentalization of American history, giving most of the white population the internal excuse of thinking of racism as a southern problem. *Hamilton* allows white America to see the story of the founding in a way that makes it seem as though there was plenty of space, both morally and actually, between the north and the south. Allowing for this space to exist is what the "grand narrative" of American history has always done. It gives white people space to think of themselves and their forebears as the heroes of their own story, without having to face the fact that these problems are not confined to one time and place in American history.

Ultimately, *Hamilton* allows white audiences to engage with dialogues about race without needing to consider why those dialogues are needed in the first place. The effect of these representations for white viewers is something akin to looking in a funhouse mirror. It is still a reflection of only the white viewer, but it is obscured and distorted, both allowing the viewer to see and not see themselves all at the same time. Baldwin addressed why this type of avoidance is problematic: "These images are designed not to trouble, but to reassure. They also weaken our ability to deal with the world as it is, ourselves as we are" (86). The casting in *Hamilton* may have made the show popular, but the fact that it is a retelling of the same legend America has been telling itself for years robs it of much of the power it could have had to spark self examination. *Hamilton* may make viewers feel a sense of unity, but as Americans, has that feeling been earned? A story that has been designed over the years to give a nation the false sense of unification does not suddenly become redeemed because the people acting it out have changed. The "grand narrative" is a concept that has been used as a way to avoid facing the fact that America has never been a unified country, much in the same way it has never been a white country. As long as the narratives of people of color in America remain hidden, there can be no reconciliation, and America can never live up to the ideals it was founded upon. The nation can only move towards unity by acknowledging and facing that fact that we have many different stories, not by forcing all America's citizens into one, reassuring telling of our history.

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