American History and National Identity on Broadway: Lin-Manuel Miranda’s


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Dat's what they say of this country back home, Kath:

“America, the land of milk and honey.” But they never
tell you the milk's gone sour and the honey's stolen.


It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in
spiritual terms, but the political institutions of any nation are
always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual
state of that nation. We are controlled here by our confusion,
far more than we know, and the American dream has therefore
become something much more closely resembling a nightmare,
on the private, domestic, and international levels. Privately, we
cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; domestically,
we take no responsiblity for (and no pride in) what goes on in
our country; and, internationally, for many millions of people,
we are an unmitigated disaster.

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Abstract

This thesis examines two Broadway musicals which reflect upon the distinctive features of American identity by revisiting American history. Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton: An American Musical* was produced in 2015 and revolves around the life of the American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. Incorporating hip-hop music and a cast of non-white actors as the Founding Fathers, the musical revisits the American Revolution with a clearly patriotic intent as it embraces the idea of the American revolutionary promise and democratic potential. On the other hand, Stephen Sondheim’s *Assassins*, which first opened Off-Broadway in 1990, portrays nine attempted or successful assassinations of American presidents over the historical span of a hundred years. It looks at American history through a different prism, by exploring the dark side of the American Dream, since it questions American ideals such as the notion of political success and social prosperity. The aim of this thesis is to delve into the revisions that these two musicals make regarding the American historical past in order to either challenge or ratify conventional conceptualizations of patriotism. Focusing on the political climate of the period in which they were composed, the thesis explores the musicals’ impact on their contemporary culture and society within a context of social crisis and political conflicts.
INTRODUCTION

I. The United States and the Broadway Musical

The Broadway musical lies at the core of the United States’ theatrical landscape and most often constitutes a mirror of the American cultural and national identity. Commonly characterized as a singularly American art form, the musical responds to sociopolitical issues and represents the American ideals and way of life. As Jeffrey Mason argues, “[p]erhaps the hallmark of ‘America’ is its broad capacity for self-invention and subsequent self-contemplation. Popular discourse tends to posit ‘America’ as autochthonous, but it is, rather, the manifestation of design, an unfolding, proliferating narrative that is the product of generations of contributing authors” (2). Therefore, America’s constant evolution, mobility and reinvention as well as its immersion in the culture of the image and the spectacle are reflected in the musical, which is distinctly characterized by movement and physical rhythm, melodramatic tensions, spectacular performance, and almost guaranteed financial success.

According to Geoffrey William Stephenson, “[c]ommercial, indeed capitalist, collaborative, eclectic in style and form, constantly evolving, and often subversive, no other performance art form so accurately depicts the nature of the American spirit” (9). The American spirit has always embraced dynamic progress, the pursuit of happiness and prosperity. Inextricably associated with the myth of the American dream, the Broadway musical has to be critically examined, since it constitutes an insightful tool for the exploration of the American social and cultural structures and practices. The American musical theatre is saturated with national narratives, which constitute the cohesive tissue of the American culture, positioning the nation as an imagined community¹ in people’s consciousness and

¹ According to Benedict Anderson, “[The nation] is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, [it] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.” (7)
propagating an idealized image of the United States as a democratic, progress-oriented, unified community. Still resonating the vibrancy of the republican discourse of the revolutionary period, America’s national narrative perpetuates the concepts of individual prosperity achieved through hard work, freedom, egalitarianism, democratic potential, multiculturalism and openness to foreign cultures. In this way, the individual’s sense of belonging is strengthened and the collective memory consolidated in an otherwise diverse and deeply fragmented society.

From a global perspective, America’s role and place in the world is undoubtedly unique. Being an interventionist superpower, the United States is a dominant actor on the world stage. Its immense global power and cultural dominance allows the American ideals to spread across the globe through various cultural media and to shape other people’s perception of the American nation. In this way, the United States sustains and reinforces its distinct national identity, which in its turn boosts a positive image of America nationally and globally. Seymour Martin Lipset argues that “[r]egardless of evidence of corruption in high places and higher violent crime rates, Americans continue to be proud of their nation, to exhibit a greater sense of patriotism and of belief that their system is superior to all others . . . They continue to believe in America and its superiority as a social system” (51). Therefore, despite America’s descent into a rather disintegrated state, in the sense that it is facing thorny issues such as extreme violence, corruption, inequality, discrimination, and political instability, the Americans continue to adopt an idealistic perspective on the nation’s identity, considering it to be powerful and united. The American identity then, lying at the core of the American society has long been an integral part of the nation’s cultural production molding people’s consciousness and influencing the world’s perception of and attitude towards the United States. The steady process of Americanization is facilitated through the dissemination of American cultural products, which come mainly from the realm of popular culture and
enhance other countries’ understanding of American mentality and way of life. Among the cultural expressions of America, the musical is the most widely recognized and embraced by audiences from all over the world, since it provides a multisensory experience often transcending the barrier of language through the aesthetics of spectacle. Being inextricably associated with Broadway, which “remains the epicenter of theatrical razzmatazz, located as it is at the curious confluence of art and commerce” (Adler 2), the musical constitutes a major medium for America’s cultural trade. Being an amalgam of acting, spoken dialogue, music and dance, the musical’s theatrical performance creates a unique experience for the audience, since it provides a spectacle which captures their attention and immerses them into its fictional world. Kathleen Marie Higgins maintains that,

[L]iterature is like music, but music’s immediacy is singular. It neither requires nor allows for translation, and it communicates with urgency because it is so direct. Its physical impact is massive, and we feel its rhythms entraining ours. Quite literally, music gets under our skin. It should be no surprise, then, that it can make us feel like blood brothers of those with whom we share it. (181)

Therefore, through the incorporation of music, the spectator becomes not only deeply involved with the performance and its content, but also formulates strong bonds with their fellow spectators through sharing the theatrical experience of the Broadway musical. Functioning on a broader scale, music reinforces Americans’ sense of empowerment by expressing messages that align with the national narrative of the American exceptionalism and thus accentuating the audience’s similar and unified characteristics. Also, aiming at stimulating the spectators’ emotional world, music inevitably invigorates their patriotic sentiments, which are associated with people’s emotional responses. I think that despite the diversity of the spectators’ social and cultural background, the Broadway musical has the power to unify the audience through its spectacular appeal. It promotes American ideals and
values in a way that they appear as universal values, emphasizing the importance of freedom, love, democracy and patriotism. In the same vein, musicals, as cultural exports predispose the audience to feel positively about the United States, since functioning on a subconscious level, music activates feelings of unity with a foreign culture.

This thesis will explore two musicals which reflect upon American identity by examining the nation’s history. Along with music, which reaches deep into the audiences’ psyche and enhances their emotional reactions, the exploration of history contributes to the arousal of feelings of solidarity and connectedness. The historical narratives lying at the core of national identity, establish strong associations among the nation’s citizens, since sharing a common past replete with collective, sometimes traumatic, memories, as well as common traditions and ideals, promotes a sense of brotherhood and unity, however illusory. National identity is not a static concept, but it keeps reinventing itself so as to conform to modern day’s requirements and global expectations:

Repositioning American history in a transnational or global terrain challenges and potentially rewrites standard treatments. It will certainly produce a more truthful or “realistic” history that finds its satisfaction in demolishing the powerful master narrative of national history, with its overtones of predestination, highlighting connectivity and flow, and making visible people and activities long deemed marginal to a nationalizing historiography. (Bright 65)

In other words, in a global context of constant change and development, the American historical background is inevitably subject to reexamination and reconstruction thus shattering the illusions of a hegemonic and authoritative narrative, which cannot be interpreted through different prisms. The musicals that I will examine revisit history from a modern-day perspective, by shedding light on marginal historical aspects and figures. However, their

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2 As Thomas Bender contends, “The nation (like a national history) represents a particular narrative of social connection that celebrates a sense of having something in common. A history in common is fundamental to sustaining the affiliation that constitutes national subjects” (1).
approach towards American narratives differ, since Hamilton revives and fortifies certain cliché American ideals, such as the essential optimism of the American dream and the illusion of inclusiveness in a democratic society, whereas Assassins challenges major ideas that are embedded in the nation’s social and ideological structures such as the ideal of equal opportunities for upward social mobility and prosperity.

II. Production History and Critical Reception of the Musicals

Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton: An American Musical was produced in 2015 and revolves around the life of the American Founding Father, Alexander Hamilton. Incorporating hip-hop music and the cast of non-white actors, with the exception of the king of Britain, the musical revisits the American Revolution and celebrates America’s cultural diversity and inclusiveness. The musical, which is still playing on Broadway, premiered Off-Broadway at the Public Theatre in February 2015 and made its Broadway debut in August 2015 at the Richard Rodgers Theatre. It is considered a musical theatre phenomenon due to its immense commercial success and enormous cultural impact. Patrick Sawer comments that “[f]rom mid-2015 Broadway tickets sold for $139-$549 (£104–£410), generating gross sales of about $88m (£65m). In the year to date, the New York show has grossed about $293m (£219m)” (n.p.). Along with the unprecedented commercial success, Hamilton has exerted a tremendous cultural influence worldwide, since it is perceived by many critics as a revolutionary work that has transformed the way people perceive history and more specifically America’s Founding era. Its witty dialogues and captivating music have been enthusiastically embraced by both the critics and the audience. As Michael Billington comments, “Miranda’s use of rap, hip-hop and R&B becomes the ideal vehicle for exploring the birth of a nation. Miranda’s music and lyrics combine two things that rarely go together: political passion and nimble wit”
Perceived as a highly innovative play due to its multiethnic cast and its overall approach to history, *Hamilton* constitutes a conscious dramatic attempt to redefine the elements that comprise the American identity. Ben Brantley argues that “*Hamilton* turns out to be the perfect voice for expressing the thoughts and drives of the diverse immigrants in the American colonies who came together to forge their own contentious, contradictory nation” (n.p.). Indeed, the musical casts light on immigrant narratives and on people who have not only been historically overlooked and victimized by discrimination and segregation, but they have also been deprived of their right to possess a national identity and share feelings of belonging.

Despite the dominant critical appraisal, *Hamilton* has also stimulated negative reactions, which focus on its historical inaccuracy as well as its inability to provide a harsh political critique of the immigrants’ enduring sociopolitical ostracism. Andrew Langer rightly claims:

> Where *Hamilton* fails is as a political statement. While *Hamilton* is ‘historic’, it treats the debates of the day with only passing fancy, and gives only scant glances to other political precepts. In fact, Miranda’s work really was more of an exercise in musical psychodrama, focusing more on the motivations, ambitions, and personal foibles of the characters, rather than on what they actually did and their political philosophies. (n.p.)

Indeed, caught up in the dramatic representation of Hamilton’s life, the play loses its argumentative power, since its political commentary is overshadowed by its melodramatic tensions. In the same vein, Lyra Monteiro claims that “[i]t’s still white history. And no amount of casting people of color disguises the fact that they’re erasing people of color from the actual narrative” (qtd. in Onion, n.p.). In other words, the single fact of the musical’s casting strategy cannot compensate for the immigrants’ traumatic experiences and struggles
for assimilation throughout the years, or eradicate their presence in the historical narrative of the revolution.

Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman’s musical *Assassins* made its Off-Broadway debut in 1990 and portrays nine attempted or successful assassinations of American presidents over the historical span of a hundred years. By revisiting history and depicting the personal dimensions of American criminals, it explores the dark side of the American Dream, since it questions the validity of American ideals such as the notion of upward mobility and success, attained through hard work and determination. Ashley Miskoff comments that “[t]he show opened during the political tension and strife of the first Gulf War, which was not the most conducive to a show about assassination” (6). It could be argued that the show was an attack upon the political decisions and practices of the American leaders, who engaging in imperialist practices, led the country to war. Furthermore, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the severe multidimensional destabilization that followed, the Broadway opening of *Assassins* was postponed, since Sondheim felt that the time was not right for a play that questioned the very essence of the American identity and culture. It finally opened on Broadway in 2004 and it was met with success.

*Assassins* received mostly negative reactions due to its sensitive sociopolitical content. In other words, the “sharp and critical view of American society was shocking and unfamiliar material for a musical when *Assassins* opened at New York’s Playwrights Horizons in 1991” (Hanson 262). Its harsh critique of the fundamental values that lie at the center of the American ideology as well as its depiction of presidential assassinations, which have stigmatized the United States and have signified turning points in the nation’s history, contributed to the play’s characterization as disturbing. On the other hand, *Assassins* has been praised for its subversive and thought-provoking content. As Charles Isherwood argues:

While most Broadway musicals are designed to disseminate the intoxicating feeling of
dreams coming true, Sondheim prefers to explore the long moment after, when the prize so enthusiastically pursued turns out to be a shoddy piece of goods. *Assassins* is his most scabrous commentary yet on the poisoned chalice of romantic illusions. (n.p.) By shattering the illusions and the promises of the American dream, the musical delves into the bleak reality of the American society and attempts to disillusion the public about deep-seated beliefs and ideas that are ingrained in people’s consciousness. Furthermore, the play’s relevance to the sociopolitical issues and frictions of our present time has been emphasized by many critics. Alex Wood claims that “in a period when political assumptions are being redrawn, and the White House is regularly mired in scandal, [a] musical obsessed with spring-loaded Americana, and how fame and that most senior office of President are intrinsically interwoven, feels intensely prescient despite being written almost 30 years ago” (n.p.). By exploring the sociopolitical depths and inconsistencies of the American ideological beliefs, the play captures America’s deep-rooted controversies, which are still prevalent in the nation’s sociopolitical terrain.
CHAPTER ONE: Hamilton: An American Musical

III. Historical Retrospection and American Identity

Constituting an essential component of the American culture, the American musical theatre often reverberates with historical retrospections, thus forming a cultural bridge between the past and the present and expressing a profound commentary on both past historical events and contemporary sociopolitical issues. The revision of the past becomes an insightful tool not only for the exploration of issues that keep reemerging and affect American society, but also for the reexamination of ideas and concerns central to the concept of the American national identity. As Nathan Eugene Stone contends, “[t]he question, ‘Who am I?’ is common to both individuals and nations. History gives a portion of the answer since individuals and nations are, in large part, products of the past” (8). Thus, the drive to explore the distinctive features of the American identity through the examination of the trajectory of the American history is evident in the musical theatre, which is often replete with idealized and critical representations of the past. In other words,

The American past, as the dominant setting for what is often called a uniquely “American” art form, becomes the vehicle whereby individual musicals both glorify and problematize American culture and values . . . Musical theater needs its ghosts—the nostalgic memories of performances, tropes, and past icons—to reconfigure and fill in gaps in communal memory. (Edney 1)

Therefore, the historical narratives have to be reconstructed so as to bring to light America’s multiple histories and solidify the exceptionalism of the United States in its global context. The musicals that this paper will examine reconfigure the American past so as to create a new historical imagination that attempts to encompass marginal histories.

Hamilton’s historical subject matter demonstrates the significance the past, and
especially the Founding period, holds for the American nation. The musical’s preoccupation with historical figures and facts has fueled a resurgence of interest not only in Alexander Hamilton and the other Founding Fathers, but also in the American Revolution and the multidimensional influence it has exerted on a global scale. By focusing primarily on Alexander Hamilton, the musical sheds light on his personal life, while simultaneously attaching heroic characteristics to the Founding Father by accentuating his virtues and struggles for independence. The American Revolution persists in collective memory and imagination as an idealized series of events that is associated with national independence, democracy, liberty, equality and self-reliance. However, the emotionally charged political rhetoric of the Revolution erases the complexities of the historical reality of the American war against Britain, which was imbued with social and political turmoil, uncertainty and violence. *Hamilton*’s romantic portrayal of this critical period is pervaded with patriotic undertones, since the play focuses on the American founders’ heroic struggles to emancipate the nation from the tyrannical England. Andrew Schocket contends that *Hamilton* falls under the genre of the “American Revolution rebooted,” (263) which encompasses all the cultural productions which revolve around the American Revolution and share common elements:

There are heroes with recognizable qualities but are nonetheless indistinct in the popular imagination, so writers can play with them; the villains are ethnically British . . . nobody likes slavery, the true brutality of which is never shown” (263) whereas “[p]atriotism consists of a personal, libertarian view of ‘freedom,’ consistent with popular contemporary definitions of liberty (who is against freedom?) and easily explained quickly onscreen. (265)

Indeed, King George, the only white character in the play, acquires evil characteristics since he represents the villainous England, and is therefore juxtaposed to Hamilton’s heroic personality. Hamilton argues that “Britain keeps shitting on us endlessly. Essentially, they tax
us relentlessly, Then King George turns around, runs a spending spree” (26), whereas a few lines later he claims himself to be a courageous warrior by declaring: “Don’t be shocked when your hist’ry book mentions me. I will lay down my life if it sets us free. Eventually, you’ll see my ascendancy” (26). Hence, despite the musical’s innovative characteristics, such as the incorporation of hip hop music, Hamilton’s approach to the Founding era could be characterized as conventional, since the musical reproduces blatantly idealized images of a glorious American past, which is undoubtedly a key component of the American identity and popular imagination.

In other words, fragments from a legendary past constitute an integral part of the people’s collective consciousness and imagination, since they facilitate their sense of belonging to a national and cultural community and they rekindle their patriotic pride. As Carroll Smith Rosenberg argues,

National identities are scripts that take form and feel natural as a result of repetitive, ritualized enactments—as when, as children, we pledge allegiance to the flag or, as adults, stand for the national anthem. To feel American, one must imagine oneself connected in some mythical way to the Puritans landing at Plymouth Rock, Paul Revere riding to Lexington and Concord . . . Thinking of such heroic figures, our hearts beat just a bit faster. But these feelings are not grounded in common experiences. (19)

Therefore, the reproduction of national narratives about the American Revolution is another ritualized act which reveals people’s nostalgic impulse to reconceptualize the mythic past, so as to fortify their common identity. Especially during economic downturns and political convulsions, the propagation of images associated with the mythic past serves as a constant reminder of the significance of their national heritage.3 Within this context, Hamilton embarks

3 The American Revolution, which signaled the emancipation of the United States and laid the foundations for the birth of an independent and powerful nation, is an elemental part of the American national heritage.
on a musical journey to a much celebrated moment of the American history in an attempt to reignite a sense of national pride and fervor in a period when the United States seems to be suffering an identity crisis. In other words, what is the musical’s contribution to the affirmation of Americans’ patriotic feelings, in the present-day society and politics, characterized by economic and political mismanagement, corruption, injustice, bigotry and sociopolitical conflicts and divisions? Certainly, a musical with such widespread appeal, which reminisces about the past and reflects on Americans’ legacy of exceptional national achievements, restores a sense of stability and unity among the people.

However, one question that arises from the exploration of the musical’s approach to history is: How historically accurate is Hamilton? The musical is based on Alexander Hamilton’s biography, written by Ron Chernow, who is the show’s historical advisor. In an interview for the New York Times’ magazine, Chernow argued that “Miranda's Hamilton is pretty close to who historians know the Founding Father to be” (Carra n.p.), whereas Joanne Freeman comments that “Broadway’s Hamilton is a fictional representation of a historicized past that comments on the present. It’s a hybrid creation filled with inventions, omissions, and fantasies, yet inspired by a biography and pumped full of references to historical documents, events, and characters” (256). Undoubtedly, Hamilton is an artistic expression and therefore it is infused with historical inaccuracies and exaggerations for dramatic purposes. However, many critics have accused Miranda of glorifying the Founding Father by overlooking his elitist and chauvinistic political outlook as well as his ambivalent position on slavery. As Nancy Isenberg maintains, “[t]hough it is clear that Hamilton purchased slaves, and his father-in-law, Phillip Schuyler, owned as many as twenty-seven slaves, his northerness, his Carribbeanness, is somehow conflated with abolitionism” (298). Indeed, in the musical, Hamilton presents his anti-slavery position: “A bunch of revolutionary manumission abolitionists? Give me a position, show me where the ammunition is!” (27). However, as
Isenberg argues, Hamilton “had no love for the unwashed masses. But that side never appears onstage, because it undermines the heroic storyline” (297).

Thus, by prioritizing the delineation of Hamilton’s heroic qualities and progressive character, Miranda compromises the historical accuracy of the play’s content. Also, given the importance the notions of diversity, equality and tolerance hold for the musical’s present-day sociopolitical stance, its factual misrepresentations and omissions propagate an acutely dubious historical image of Hamilton, as an abolitionist, which clashes with the play’s asserted historical reliability. In other words, the show’s failure to be historically accurate is really problematic when one takes into consideration the play’s magnitude as a cultural phenomenon as well as its engagement with a realistic representation of the past.

One deliberate divergence in the representation of the Founding era which requires thorough exploration is the show’s novel approach to casting. The incorporation of African-American, Asian and Latino actors to portray the Founding Fathers and their contemporaries contributes to the musical’s innovative character, and by extension to the show’s immense success. Mirroring today’s multicultural society, Hamilton’s goal is to give racially diverse people the chance to identify with the national historical narratives and to see themselves reflected in the story of the Founding period. Matthew Brown suggests:

The combination of minority actors portraying well-known white historical figures with contemporary musical devices such as rap, which originated in minority communities but is widely consumed throughout society now, creates a form of historical anachronism that surprisingly helps to clarify rather than confuse the importance of the issue of race in the show. (492)

Indeed, the contrast that is created between the historical figures and the ethnically diverse actors who embody them illuminates the fact that race constitutes a thorny issue that has

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4 In my analysis, I focus exclusively on the black actors’ importance in the play, since in the original production of Hamilton, the majority of the actors, who portray white characters, are black.
existed since the birth of the nation and still resonates among the modern public. Therefore, by reinventing the American past, the musical touches upon the issue of immigrant inclusivity in the nation’s history and endeavors to reconfigure the position minority groups hold in modern society by placing them at the core of the national narrative. Despite the fact that the topic of race is organically interwoven in the fabric of the musical’s subject matter, the multicultural casting is not a successful political choice, which could be thought to reclaim immigrants’ dignity and national identity and challenge the rigid sociopolitical structures which place ethnically diverse people at a disadvantaged position.

The parallelism between the multiethnic actors and the Founding Fathers downplays the crucial role black people played in the American Revolution, since it obliterates their existence in the actual historical narrative. Wendell Phillips underlines black people’s struggles in the war by commenting that, “in the days of our country’s weakness, we remembered their power to help . . . us, and availed ourselves gladly of their generous services, while we have, since, used our strength only to crush them the more completely” (8). Thus, black people’s active involvement in the revolutionary war necessitates the inclusion of real black historical figures in Hamilton, which is considered to be a subversive reinvention of the historical account. As Matthew Brown rightly argues, “Miranda’s genius in casting minority actors in the archetypical white roles ensures that the question of race isn’t ignored. But it also doesn’t answer anything” (494). Hamilton’s casting device fails to make a bold political statement, since it flimsily touches upon the multifaceted issue of racial injustice and inclusiveness, whereas this superficiality is strengthened through the restricted representation of slavery throughout the show. In other words, Miranda touches upon the issue of slavery in an oblique way, failing to expose the inhumanity of this institution and inaccurately implying that Hamilton was pro-immigrant and in favor of abolitionism.
IV. The Celebration of the American Dream

*Hamilton* delves not only into the nation’s historical past, but also explores the ideological doctrines and the mythological constructs anchored in social structures and political discourse. The American society is replete with mythological structures which pervade the crevices of the American culture and crystallize the national ideals of democracy, equality and freedom. Being at the core of the ideological system the “myth can be viewed as a belief or symbol expressed in dramatic narrative form that lives on in the psyche and culture of a people, often because it is invested with emotional intensity and fulfills the important societal need of binding a populace together” (Yanarella and Sigelman 3).

One mythological construction that is profoundly embedded in the tissue of the collective consciousness is the American dream, which permeates the national consciousness and imagination. Some of the components of the American dream can be traced back to the birth of the nation with the Declaration of Independence, which states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (n.p.) The American dream, being the cornerstone of the American social and political discourse and the ideological backbone of the American culture, offers a sense of national unity and cohesion, in a nation that is characterized by heterogeneity and diversity. As Sarah Marie Horning contends,

The Dream is a particularly important home for political discourse since it acts in many ways as America’s “unifying theme.” Imbued with a sense of community, the Dream represents a view of America’s national solidarity rather than as a fragmented body of confederated states, races, ethnicities, cultures, communities, and political partisans. (4)

As the country of boundless possibilities, the United States epitomizes, according to the myth
of the American dream, the land of democracy, freedom, self-government and equality, and invites Americans and immigrants to discover and utilize their innate capabilities so as to actualize their aspirations.

Being an inextricable part of the ideological framework of national identity, the American dream is inevitably projected onto literary production, which, reflecting upon individual experiences, reveals the American dream’s implications for the individual and the community.\(^5\) However, the literary works could either propagate the ethos of the American dream, by capturing the positive aspects of this ideological structure and perpetuating an idealized representation of it, or could dismantle the mythical ingredients that define the American dream and illuminate the bleak reality that lurks behind its façade. Despite the fact that the American dream is a complex notion that keeps reinventing itself, its examination through literary works that adopt divergent perspectives on the particular ideological structure, could shed light not only on some of its facets, but also on the distinctive character of the American society and culture.

*Hamilton* propagates the basic values that are associated with the American dream ideology, by delineating an immigrant success story. These values are introduced at the very beginning of *Hamilton* and are tightly interwoven with the musical’s storyline. The show’s opening lines predispose the audience of the musical’s adherence to narratives of success: “How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, grow up to be a hero and a scholar?” (16). A large part of the musical revolves around this question, which is answered later on:

The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father

Got a lot further by working a lot harder

\(^5\) The presence of the American dream is particularly noticeable in American literature, which mirrors, embraces or challenges the components embedded in the American dream ideology. Lois Tyson argues that “[b]ecause literature is a repository of both a society’s ideologies and its psychological conflicts, it has the capacity to reveal aspects of a culture’s collective psyche: the ways in which ideological investments reveal the nature of individuals’ psychological relationship to the world” (1).
By being a lot smarter
By being a self-starter
By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter. (16)

Alexander Hamilton’s portrayal as an illegitimate, underprivileged immigrant, who as a child experienced family tragedy and financial hardships, “stands in marked contrast to his well-born rivals Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Aaron Burr, each of them descendants of old Virginia and New England aristocracy” (Magness 497). Therefore, his disadvantaged background differentiates him from the other Founding Fathers, and puts a particular emphasis on Hamilton’s journey of individual transformation and social ascent. Thus, “the very basis of praise for Hamilton’s character is derivative of and contingent upon his being a bastard immigrant in a world disposed to high-born inheritance” (Magness 498). In other words, the glorification of Hamilton stems from his experience of rising above adversity and impoverishment and becoming one of the most influential and prominent historical figures, that contributed enormously to laying the foundations of the new nation. Hamilton’s story of a self-made immigrant that builds himself from the bottom up and advances socially through his innate capabilities, such as brilliance and inventiveness, as well as hard work and self-reliance, incarnates the ultimate immigrant success story which aligns perfectly with the tenets of the American dream, namely the idea that any individual is given equal opportunities for prosperity and social mobility.

This idea is further consolidated through the device of the multicultural casting. The integration of multiethnic actors to represent the American Founding Fathers insinuates that racially diverse groups not only constitute an integral part of the nation’s historical trajectory, but also share the same opportunities with the American people and can therefore prosper by realizing the American dream. Hamilton transcends the deep-rooted and persistent racial barriers and injustices that immigrants encounter due to the prejudices and stereotypical
myths that are indelibly etched in the American consciousness and creates an image of national unity and coherence. Hamilton articulates towards the end of the show:

I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me.

America, you great unfinished symphony.

You sent for me.

You let me make a difference.

A place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up. (273)

However, Phillip Magness contends, “[i]n stark contrast with the musical’s concluding scene, Alexander Hamilton died with a profoundly pessimistic outlook where immigration to the United States was concerned” (506), since “[b]y the end of his life, his political beliefs actually placed him among the leading advocates of immigration restrictions in the Founding generation” (498). In other words, his nationalistic political agenda and xenophobic sentiments contradict his immigrant identity and underline the dominant anti-immigrant political positions of the period. Therefore, since neither the past nor the present sociopolitical reality corresponds fully to the idea that immigrants are given equal opportunities\textsuperscript{6} for prosperity and unconditional access to social rights and services, then what is the purpose of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s casting choice? On the one hand, the multiethnic casting emphasizes the significance of the historical presence and the political and cultural inclusion of immigrants, and stresses America’s diverse cultural landscape. However, I think that Miranda’s choice is indicative of a general political and cultural tendency to obscure the past and modern-day structural racism and to depict a sociopolitical reality that aligns with the

\textsuperscript{6}Toni Morrison rightly argues that “[s]tatement[s]…insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion” (46).
tenets of the American dream. This propagation of idealized representations of reality is associated with negative consequences.

The enduring allegiance to the promises of the American dream not only entraps the individual into a set of fictional self-expectations but also triggers people’s longing and quest for social status, power and wealth.\(^7\) Thus, they become ensnared in a vicious circle of unfulfilled desire for goals and things that are constantly changing. As Jennifer Hochschild argues,

>[the American dream] deceives as well as liberates when it teaches that people do control their own destiny rather than helping them to recognize limits that have nothing to do with their own abilities or desires. Thus, for the poor as for the rich, the American dream encourages everyone to succeed but helps no one to fail. And the paradox of remaining under the spell, like the paradox of succeeding more, demonstrates what happens when that discrepancy is played out in people’s lives. (252-53)

In other words, the desire for success places a heavy burden on the individual, who becomes disillusioned when the achievement of the American dream proves to be a deceptive ideological construct. The idea that personal choices and struggles determine one’s financial success and social position erases completely the existence of external factors, such as the broader socioeconomic conditions, the inherent and inevitable social inequalities and preexisting social hierarchies, as well as other unpredictable determinants. Therefore, the individual is totally victimized by the optimism and the misleading discourses of the American dream and becomes oblivious to the effects that the larger societal operations and structures exert on their life. Hence, the reproduction of narratives which embrace and

\(^7\) In his endeavor to explore Jacques Lacan’s notion of desire, Slavoj Zizek contends that “the relation of the subject to the object [is] experienced by every one of us in a dream: the subject, faster than the object, gets closer and closer to it and yet can never attain it—the dream paradox of a continuous approach to an object that nevertheless preserves a constant distance.”
promote the beliefs of the American dream, becomes problematic, since it clashes with the complex sociopolitical reality. In *Hamilton’s* world, an immigrant that doesn’t “have a dollar to [his] name, an acre of land, a troop to command, a dollop of fame” (76), ascends the social and political ladder having only his “honor, a tolerance for pain, a couple of college credits and [his] top-notch brain” (76). *Hamilton’s* deceptively simplistic and idealistic approach to the ethos of the American dream carries specific implications in the current context of global mass immigration.

In the face of the present-day complicated and shifting sociopolitical circumstances, pertaining to a mobility towards right-wing ideologies and chauvinism, the show’s political statement of equality and unity acquires conflicting connotations, which need to be carefully explored. The musical was written and produced in the Obama era\(^8\) whereas the president Barack Obama watched an early production of *Hamilton* some years ago, when “[t]he show’s creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, performed a song from ‘The Hamilton Mixtape’ back on May 12, 2009, at the White House Evening of Poetry, Music and the Spoken Word . . . Michelle Obama snapped along to the tune, while the president laughed throughout it. Once Miranda was done singing, Obama led the audience in giving him a standing ovation” (1). This short commentary on Obama’s first encounter with Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical, encapsulates *Hamilton’s* undeniable association with the Obama administration and the ideals upon which it is based. Similarly to Alexander Hamilton, Barack Obama’s racial identity changed the political panorama since he incarnated the common, middle-class man who arose to political preeminence through hard work, commitment and brilliance. Obama’s presidency is considered to be a historical milestone, since it infused the American society with an aura of optimism, regarding racial tolerance and equality and it allegedly ushered the United States in a post-racial era. Indeed, the presidency of Barack Obama generated unprecedented

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\(^8\) For more information on the Obama era, see “The Psychological Legacy of Barack Obama: The Impact of the First African-American President of the United States on Individuals’ Social Cognition,” by Luis Rivera and Ashley Plant.
opportunities for the racial minority groups’ political and cultural representation and promoted the ideals of inclusion and unity in the context of eliminating racial discrimination and dismantling racial barriers. However, as Michael Peters rightly points out, Obama “has . . . carefully used the intellectual resources of the American Dream to unify Americans and to provide the vision for the society he wants others to dream of. The question is, in a time of decline, how serviceable is this dream: Can it be restored? Are its core ideals able to be refashioned?” (28). Introduced and strengthened during Barack Obama’s presidency, the ideals of multiculturalism and equality are further substantiated and culturally transmitted through Miranda’s musical. Despite the fact that the racial inclusion Hamilton advocates is worthy of critical acclaim, the show’s reproduction of narratives that embrace and promote racial diversity belittles America’s racial issues and blatant racism that still afflicts ethnically and racially distinct groups.

The disparities that exist between the delusion of an inclusive and post-racial American nation and the realities of daily existence become even more prominent in the context of Trump’s administration. Trump’s immigration policy reveals the President’s exclusionary practices and his adherence to a white supremacist ideology, which is inevitably associated with racial discrimination and unabashed bigotry. Therefore, Donald Trump’s ascension to the presidency mirrors the resurgence of xenophobia in the American society as well as an ardent nationalism amidst a sociopolitical and financial crisis. Under these conditions, Hamilton’s emphasis on the issue of race becomes more relevant than ever, whereas the play’s advocacy of racial equity could stimulate a process of introspection and self-examination on a national level. However, the delineation of Alexander Hamilton’s

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9 As Mary Romero comments, Donald Trump characterizes Mexican immigrants as a threat to the U.S. and its citizens. While many of us find this racist rhetoric abhorrent, a recent study . . . finds that at least some U.S. Whites believe that Latinos pass on a “deficient” culture from one generation to another. And Trump doesn’t stop with Mexicans. To him, Muslims are ubiquitously bad, locked in a dichotomy that pits “good” Americans against “evil” Muslims . . . Trump’s binary worldview . . . is present in all his communication, from official speeches to inflammatory tweets. (35)

10 For more information on racism in Trump’s era, see “Racism in Trump's America: reflections on culture, sociology, and the 2016 US presidential election,” by Lawrence D. Bobo.
success story, and the depiction of an immigrant who comes “up from the bottom” (17) and manages to overcome multiple hardships and to “rise up” (28), clashes utterly with today’s intricate workings of society. Being victimized by the racial hostility that permeates American society as well as by the inherent inequality that characterizes all societies, many racially diverse people are excluded from the promises of the American dream and are ostracized from the American Eden. In the face of Trump’s racist agenda and urgently controversial tactics, *Hamilton*’s message becomes ironic and completely illusory and gives the impetus to the cultivation and adherence to a chimerical representation of reality.

 Being inextricably linked to popular culture, *Hamilton* is enmeshed in the web of commodification and the culture of spectacle. As has already been stated, *Hamilton* has been a colossal success and has left an indelible mark on popular culture, since it is considered one of the most prominent and profitable musicals that have been produced in recent years. The captivating music, the novel casting device and the quintessential immigrant success story have contributed to the show’s elevation to a cultural phenomenon that has spread in the social media realm. Given the illusory and idealistic content of the musical’s subject matter when juxtaposed to the U.S. present-day reality, a question inevitably arises: What lies behind the show’s unprecedented success? First of all, considering America’s heterogeneity, the enhancement of the illusion of unity and coherence, through literary narratives which attempt to establish a reality of shared experience, has been an ever-present need. Furthermore, in this image-saturated world, the spectacle is transformed into a major driving force that is inevitably incorporated in and even exploited by the world of cultural production. *Hamilton* is based on the most appealing element of the spectacle, since its political stance is inseparably associated with the power of images. In particular, the multiracial actors and the spectacular rap and hip hop music constitute the core ingredients of the show’s political statement. However, hidden behind the electrifying spectacle, the rapid and dazzling images as well as
the melodramatic tensions, the power of the political message that *Hamilton* intends to propagate is diminished. The images that *Hamilton* brings to the fore appear to be revolutionary by reconstructing the traditional American narratives, but as the musical’s storyline indicates, behind the façade of innovation lurks the otherwise conventional and white-centric story. Commodification expands into all corners of the modern sociopolitical and cultural world and the spectacle dominates in all the aspects of the capitalist society. As Ellis Cashmore rightly claims, “[t]oday, we live in a market: the scope of commodification is now so wide that everything, including difference, can be reshaped into a package that can be bought and sold” (164). In other words, being a product of the modern mass culture, which has been pervaded by commodification and superficiality, *Hamilton’s* sociopolitical commentary, which revolves around the notions of racial equality and inclusiveness, relies on the spectacle as well as on a simplistic embrace of the American dream ideology. Thus, the musical provides an inadequate exploration of the modern reality, since it lacks the depth and the objectivity that the examination of the current multifaceted state of things demands and the audience is left distracted by the power of the spectacle and with their capacity of critical thinking diminished.
CHAPTER TWO: Assassins

V. A Subversive Rewriting of the American Past

Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman’s musical Assassins revolves around the black pages of American history by examining either attempted or successful assassinations of American presidents. The presidential assassinations constitute traumatic events in American history, since they are considered to be some of the most far-reaching instances of political violence. They do not only exert a tremendous impact on the sociopolitical and economic realm of the nation, but also stimulate an intense sense of shock among the public, that becomes completely disoriented and overwhelmed by fear, anxiety, helplessness and grief. The main factor that triggers these extreme emotional responses lies behind the fact that the President’s “official position makes a chief executive a reassuring symbol against threats from potential enemies and a potentially hostile environment, regardless of whether one approves of his politics. His sudden death shocks because it removes that protection” (Edelman and Simon 201). Indeed, the ambiguity that surrounds the political assassination regarding the assassin’s motives, his political allegiances and ideology, as well as the overall implications of his abhorrent act, intensifies people’s fear of national instability and sociopolitical turbulence. The possibility of internal subversion or foreign intrusion appears imminent and the public’s feelings of anxiety and insecurity are enhanced. Also, a political figure and especially the President is considered to be a symbolic representation of the whole nation, since he mirrors core national values and ideals. Therefore a President’s brutal assassination is not a violent act against an individual, but rather it constitutes an assault upon the American nation and community as a whole and for that reason it could shake the foundations upon which the American identity is built. It becomes apparent then, that the presidential assassinations are turning points in the American history, due to their multidimensional
impact and the indelible mark they leave on the American people’s consciousness. Thus, they have haunted the collective imagination for years and have inspired multiple literary works.

*Assassins* does not only revisit America’s glorified past, but approaches history through a different prism, by incorporating in its historical recollection the voices of people who are considered to be social outcasts. The individuals who attempted or managed to assassinate the American presidents throughout the years have been stigmatized as evil or mentally unstable and have been targeted by society for their heinous crimes. Thus, Sondheim and Weidman’s choice to articulate the thoughts of these people constitutes an intriguing and thought-provoking approach to the American past, since the musical explores the diametrically opposite perspectives to the ones that prevail in the national memory. As Kathryn Ann Tremper Edney maintains, “the musical is part of a wider, late-twentieth century trend in American history and popular culture where there was a need to tell American history ‘from the bottom up,’ thus including people and stories previously deemed unimportant to how the history of the United States unfolded” (182). Hence, the play enriches the national narratives about the presidential assassinations by shedding light on the marginal protagonists of the events and their individual stories. In other words, it subverts the official history and emphasizes the role the “anti-heroes,” as opposed to the political “heroes,” played in shaping historical reality. Moving beyond the stark binary oppositions of good and evil, since assassins are depicted as both virtuous and immoral, the musical reconstructs our perception of the historical facts by creating a fictional reality, which is not defined by absolutist moral stances. The assassins are depicted as human beings, with weaknesses, sensitivities, vulnerabilities and impulses. For instance, John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Abraham Lincoln, is portrayed after the assassination as “sit[ting] huddled on the floor, wet and trembling, a shawl pulled around his shoulders” (15-16), while simultaneously he seems really concerned about his reputation: “He was a bloody tyrant and we brought him down!
And I will not have history think I did it for a bag of gold or in some kind of rabid fit!” (17). The villainous killer who is considered to be the pioneer in the presidential assassinations in the United States is pictured as a self-conscious, ordinary human being, whose actions are certainly not justified but rather approached in a more realistic manner. Therefore, the audience gradually and involuntarily sympathizes with these identifiable characters, who have long persisted in people’s memories as inhuman and cold-blooded killers.

Although Assassins is based on historical facts and figures, it transcends historical accuracy, by interweaving time periods and integrating imaginary elements in its historical narratives. Rather than taking an interest in the accurate delineation of the American past, Sondheim and Weidman use history as a tool so as to explore the theme of presidential assassinations in the United States. The typical, in historical works, linear chronology is disrupted in the musical, since the protagonists that lived and acted in completely different eras interact with each other by sharing the same temporal and spatial space. Assassins from John Wilkes Booth, who killed Abraham Lincoln in 1865, to Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President William McKinley in 1901, are located in the same saloon, which “could be on 14th Street in 1900, or on Columbus Avenue in 1991” (24). Likewise, Sara Jane Moore and Squeaky Fromme, who both attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford within 17 days apart from one another, are depicted in the play as associates who collaborated to kill the President together, but in real life, their attempts were not connected in any way. The controversy and uncertainty that surround the presidential assassinations have contributed to the emergence of various fabricated stories, and therefore it is hard to disentangle the truth from mythology.
VI. The Indictment of the American Dream

In addition to the purposeful disruption of historical truthfulness, *Assassins* provides a subversive perspective on the notion of the American dream, which similarly to *Hamilton*, constitutes its core thematic concern. However, in contrast to Miranda’s work that celebrates the dogmas of the American dream, *Assassins* illuminates the deleterious impact that the financial and social inequalities exert on the individual. Despite the fact that each assassination is a unique case of political violence that has to be examined separately, “the motives are generally political in nature, target some larger collective for impact (e.g., nation, social system), and are aimed at large-scale political and social change. As such, assassinations are not random events; but rather are systematic, though rare, occurrences influenced by social, political, and economic conditions” (Yammarino, et al. 823). The musical brings to the fore the political connotations that surround the acts of assassination, by focusing on the ideal of the American dream, whose chimerical nature haunts the assassins’ motivations. The discrepancy between the ideal that all people are capable of attaining their own version of success and the growing economic disparity of real life, is particularly underscored throughout the show. As Michael Peters suggests,

> In the United States, there is considerable evidence that systems and structures work to the distinct advantage of some and to the disadvantage of others. Obviously, growing and structured inequality is not compatible with the American Dream, as its main ideological tenet is to suggest that all can succeed . . . Americans cannot continue to hold deep-rooted beliefs in the principles of individualism, opportunity and meritocracy in the face of such growing inequalities. (34-35)

Therefore, *Assassins* subverts the ethos of the American dream, by highlighting and mocking its outmoded propositions, in a society that is governed by social hierarchy and financial
imbalances, which more often than not leads socially excluded people to engage in retaliatory violent responses.

This correlation between the disillusionment with the ideal of meritocracy and the adoption of extreme violent behaviors is thoroughly examined throughout the musical. The undertaking of the assassins to commit their crime seems to be closely linked to their impoverished and underprivileged state. The character of Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated president William McKinley in 1901, describes the terrible working conditions he faces: “In the factory where I work there is an oven. Inside the oven, there are bottles... If two bottles touch, they break. The burning pieces fall on me, my hair, my clothes... From this I have this scar—(He pulls up his sleeve). Will never go away. For this I am paid six cents an hour” (27). In the same vein, Giuseppe Zangara, who attempted to assassinate Franklin Roosevelt recounts fragments from his past:

When I am a boy,
No school.
I work in a ditch.
No chance.
The smart and the rich
Ride by,
Don’t give no glance.
Ever since then, because of them,
I have this sickness in the stomach,
Which is the way I make my idea
To go out and kill Roosevelt. (31)

Being denied the opportunity to lead a dignified life and being excluded from the world of affluence, Zangara and Czolgosz consider the idea to kill the president as the only feasible
outlet from the hardships. Building around the assassins’ disadvantaged state, the proprietor “of a shooting gallery at a carnival” (4) is the character that at the beginning of the show appears to encourage the assassins to perpetrate the assassination, by arguing that,

No job? Cupboard bare?
One room, no one there?
Hey, pal, don’t despair—
You wanna shoot a President?
(Puts a gun in Czolgosz’s hand)
C’mom and shoot a President… (6)

Behind the ironic thread that runs through the proprietor’s argument lies the idea that extreme conditions of poverty and deprivation trigger violent behaviors, which aim at disrupting the sociopolitical order and making a political statement. Driven by the individual’s despair and entanglement in a vicious circle of distress and adversity, the instances of political violence reaffirm the existence of the systemic injustices and power imbalances that pervade the American social structure. Employing Slavoj Zizek’s notion of systemic violence, one could argue that the marginalized individuals’ despicable violent acts are just the most obvious manifestations of a brutality that masks itself by being desubjectified and well-hidden under the façade of a “smooth functioning of [the] economic and political systems” (Zizek 2). As Zizek contends,

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a dearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts.” (1)
Assassins, then, draws our attention to the naturalized violence that is embedded in the capitalist structures and which not only eradicates social exclusions and divisions but also inevitably breeds political violence and conflict.

The striking power inequity and the systemic disorder that characterize the American society are exacerbated by the stress on individualism and upward mobility. The importance placed on the individual’s responsibility for their social position and status has acquired the dimensions of a persisting obsession that has haunted the American imagination for years. In Assassins, the dogmas that comprise the American dream are introduced at the very beginning, when the proprietor urges the assassins to realize their aspirations:

If you keep your
Goal in sight,
You can climb to
Any height.
Everybody’s
Got the right
To their dreams . . . (7)

The value orientation toward goal fulfillment and achievement, as it is ironically articulated in the proprietor’s words, generates a culturally-imposed pressure on the individual, who feels forced to prosper and flourish, despite the various adversities. This emphasis on competitive achievement fosters an antagonistic environment that is conducive to a mentality which measures a person’s esteem and value solely by their position on the social ladder. Thus, the people who live on the margins of society and consequently do not have access to economic opportunities, are automatically devalued and degraded. Their failure to succeed is associated with a failure to contribute meaningfully to society. These marginalized subjects, having experienced the social stigma and alienation that follow their downfall are more prone to
deviance and violence, since they are motivated by their need to overthrow the restraining societal powers and to disrupt the hegemonic structures that led them to destitution. This need is exhibited by their attack on the American presidents, who are the symbolic figures of political order and authority. As Seymour Martin Lipset argues, “in a country that stresses success above all, people are led to feel that the most important thing is to win the game, regardless of the methods employed doing so. American culture applies the norms of a completely competitive society to everyone. Winners take all” (47). Therefore, in a social context that prioritizes the attainment of social rewards and pressures the individual to succeed at any cost, the tendency towards anomie is aggravated. In this light, the assassins in Sondheim and Weidman’s musical desire not only to subvert the sociopolitical fabric that has utterly subjugated them, but they also aspire to acquire a sense of accomplishment and to move beyond the restrictive social boundaries by gaining recognition and attention. As the character of Charles Guiteau argues “when you’ve a gun— / everybody pays attention” (46). Victimized by the cultural demand for accomplishment and distinction, the musical’s assassins resort to political violence so as to declare the significance of their existence, in a world that is overwhelmed by the desperate need to rise above the circumstances and to achieve greatness.

The aforementioned social and political motives that lie behind the American presidential assassinations are often belittled by the American media, which aim at diffusing the sociopolitical tension. In the play, the Balladeer, who is “[a] woody Guthrie / Pete Seeger-style folk singer” (4) and seemingly incarnates the American society, maintains that,

Every now and then
A madman’s
Bound to come along.

Doesn’t stop the story—
Story’s pretty strong. (15)

The characterization of the assassins as “madmen” by the balladeer is a recurring pattern throughout the musical, which reflects the stance adopted by a large part of the American population. This way, the status quo is maintained and the possibilities for radical social change are diminished, since “the story’s pretty strong” (15) and the “madmen / Have had their say— / But only for a day” (22). Hoerl, et al. comment that,

On March 30, 1981, John W. Hinckley, Jr. shot President Ronald Reagan in the chest and then-White House Press Secretary James Brady in the head. In response, New York Times columnist Jane Brody commented: “In this country nearly all assassins have been personally, not politically, motivated.” . . . While that description might fit John Hinckley rather closely, it does not do so equally for other American would-be assassins since 1973, who sometimes have articulated a mixture of political and psychological motives and expressed despair over having few viable outlets for their grievances. (83)

Although there are multiple reasons, including mental disorder, which could drive a person to commit an assassination, the importance of the political motives that lie behind such instances of extreme political violence is more often than not minimized by the political and media representatives. In the aftermath of a political assassination, when social unrest and political turmoil reach their peak, the need for an illusory sense of firmness and stability is enhanced. Thus, in a desperate attempt to safeguard the social order, the political realm and the media landscape are dominated by images and discourses which stigmatize the assassins as psychologically unstable and deluded individuals, who lead a parasitic life and are driven to criminality by personal failures. In order to disentangle John Booth’s motivation for killing Lincoln, the proprietor argues:

Your brother made you jealous, John,
You couldn’t fill his shoes,

Was that the reason, tell us, John—

Along with bad reviews? (16)

Claiming that a mixture of personal issues triggered Booth’s act presents a deranged person who, discontented with the miseries of his life, decided to assassinate the president. This simplistic interpretation of the facts eradicates the political connotations that are inextricably entrenched in an act of assassination and obliterates the complex interrelation between the individual and the society.

Throughout the musical, there is an emphasis on the interdependence that connects the individual and the wider sociopolitical environment. Employing the notion of family, the musical emphasizes the interconnection between the individual and the sociopolitical realm and underlines the individual’s confusion and alienation in a world where the lines between right and wrong, truth and lie are blurred. Samuel Byck who attempted to assassinate Richard Nixon, makes some insightful comments in his extensive monologue:

Oil embargoes, megatons, holes in the ozone. Who can understand this crap? We need to believe, to trust like little kids, that someone wants what’s best for us, that someone’s looking out for us . . . Do they? No. They lie to us! They lie about what’s right, they lie about what’s wrong . . . Then we get terrified. Like children waking in the dark, we don’t know where we are. “I had a bad dream! Mommy! Daddy!” . . . And daddy comes and takes me in his arms and says, “It’s O.K., Sammy. Daddy’s here. I love you, kid. Your mommy doesn’t, but I do.” And mommy comes and holds me tight and says, “I’ve got you, Bubala. I’m here for you. Your daddy isn’t, but I am . . . And then where are we? Who do we believe? What do we do?! (A beat) We do what we have to do. We kill the president. (77)
Certainly, the last lines are indicative of the irony that pervades the whole musical, regarding the assassins’ stance on their actions. In other words, the assassins portray the assassination of the American president as a deed that will definitely empower them. This idea is ironically approached throughout the play, bringing to light the absurdity that lurks behind it. However, most of the assassins’ arguments are thought-provoking and provide an insight into a world that has descended into violent chaos and ambiguity. The political discourses which are saturated with lies and inaccuracies, expose the political representatives’ immorality and attempt to manipulate the masses so as to fulfill their personal aspirations. In the face of political corruption and social inequity, the individual is metamorphosed into a fragmented and unstable person, who has lost any point of reference and cohesion. When the American ideals, which serve as the nation’s cohesive tissue, collapse and lose any meaning attached to them, the familial bonds that connect the people and the state disintegrate and the family structure is dismantled. This way, people could become more susceptible to violent behaviors, since they feel estranged and separated from the meaningless cultural values and the corrupted political institutions.
CONCLUSION

Assassins provides a subversive commentary on the American history, culture and politics, whereas Hamilton, despite the employment of some novel devices, approaches the American ideals and historical background in a rather conventional manner. First of all, Sondheim and Weidman’s musical underlines, through the delineation of the assassins’ personal stories and perspectives, the multiplicity and relativity of points of view and by extension the subjective voices that construct the historical narratives. Neither evil nor innocent, the assassins are depicted in the play as both victims of the degenerated sociopolitical system as well as foolish caricatures who perpetrated abhorrent violent deeds. On the other hand, Hamilton’s ideological underpinnings promote a more absolutist moral position, which classifies people and things in binary categories, such as the good revolutionaries and the bad King of England. Despite the portrayal of Alexander Hamilton’s personal side, mainly by depicting his extramarital affair, the musical attaches to the first Secretary of the Treasury heroic qualities, whereas it eradicates from its story Hamilton’s controversial political agenda. In other words, Hamilton’s anti-immigrant sentiments as well as America’s history of racism are completely erased from Miranda’s narrative, which on the contrary idealizes the American past. Furthermore, the Assassins views the American ideals through the prism of their negative impact on the individual, by exploring not only the unbearable pressure the notion of the American dream exerts on people, but also its elusive and illusory nature. Employing irony and sarcasm, the musical questions the very essence of the American dream and highlights the fact that the inherent violence and inequality that characterize society render the achievement of the American dream impossible. Contrarily, the character of Alexander Hamilton epitomizes the American ethic of immigrants’ endless opportunities for prosperity and accomplishment. As Hamilton’s success reveals, Lin-Manuel
Miranda’s approach seems to be more palatable to the popular audience of today, whereas the Assassins’ reception was marked by diverse opinions, due to its sensitive subject matter and supposedly unpatriotic agenda. Therefore, Hamilton’s commercial impact and Assassins’ mixed reactions suggest that a large part of the American population is so acclimatized to illusive and deceptive ideological constructs, which generate a false sense of stability and coherence, that they desire to remain blind to the inherent contradictions and imbalances of the American society. People’s blindness and passivity in the face of structural violence might not only be an undesirable effect of the ideology of the American dream, but could also be its ultimate goal: Self-absorbed and inactive people that blame themselves for their underprivileged position are ideal members in a deeply unequal society. However, in a time when there is a proliferation of diverse perspectives, interpretations and distractions, the adoption of a critical stance towards historical narratives and cultural ideas is a necessary step, which could dismantle the nations’ deep-seated illusions and ignite a process of self-criticism leading to improvement and progress.
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