“What Is a Legacy?”:

The Timelessness of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*

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Abstract

“My only real insight in writing the show was that all of the problems, paradoxes, and fights at the present of the Founding [of America] are still here; that’s how I was able to write about them,” says Lin-Manuel Miranda in an interview for Entertainment! Tonight channel about his play Hamilton: An American Musical (2015) that turned into a Broadway sensation. This theatrical piece brings on stage the life of the first Secretary of Treasury and Founding Father of the United States, Alexander Hamilton, through the unexpected medium of hip-hop/rap music, and explores the issues that emerged after the Founding Fathers embarked on uncharted waters by establishing a new nation. Hamilton has proved to be more relevant than ever in 21st century America as the same issues still dichotomize the American population. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons that account for Hamilton’s success appears to be its timelessness and timeliness. Miranda adds that “Because [Hamilton] deals with issues at the root, it’s always going to be relevant in some form.” The aim of this thesis is to argue that Hamilton sheds light on the fact that the same pressing sociopolitical issues of the 1770s-1800s, namely the subject of race, immigration, the very definition of the American Dream, political demagoguery, and the phenomenon of gun violence, resonate in contemporary America. The thesis will focus on the historical context of both periods and the ways that Hamilton comments on the aforementioned issues.
Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr
INTRODUCTION, *or*  

“What’s Your Name, Man?”

I. Nation, Identity, and Theater

Lin-Manuel Miranda composed *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) after reading Ron Chernow’s biography on Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of Treasury and Founding Father of the United States of America. Little did he know back then *Hamilton* would create a great sensation among audiences and turn a new page in the history of the American musical theater. The play combines two distinctly American elements that make up the United States’ national and cultural identity, namely the Founding of the new nation and the genre of musical theater. The history of the establishment of the American nation is such an important constituent of American patriotism that in light of the 9/11 attacks, arguably the most devastating terrorist attacks in contemporary American history, “the Founding was called upon to revitalize the national narratives of resilience and power” (Brown “Hamilton on Broadway and the Founding in American Culture” 486). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the particular myth has been the subject of multiple artistic ventures, including theatrical plays.  

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1 The print version of the musical is the libretto *Hamilton: The Revolution* (2016), written and annotated by Lin-Manuel Miranda, including additional remarks by the co-producer of the show, Jeremy McCarter. The page referencing to the play throughout the thesis is based on the libretto. The story behind the inspiration of *Hamilton* is narrated by McCarter in the book (11), referring to how Miranda got the idea of merging hip-hop with history for a Broadway show.

2 Christopher Bigsby characterizes theater as “a present –tense art with a history of registering shifts in the psychological, social, political subsoil [of a nation]” (273); thus, the importance of historical plays like *Hamilton* for the national identity of a country should not be underestimated, especially for the shaping of a common identity of a relatively new nation, like America. Jeffrey Mason also states that the stage becomes “a platform where players and audience may enact conceptions of identity and community, where ‘America’ becomes both the subject and the consequence of artistic, cultural, and social negotiation.” (4) In other words,
noted that the United States have a long-standing history with musical theater. In particular, after the American Civil War, playwrights launched a new form of native musical theater that combined singing, dancing with acting and storytelling, which would, later on, develop into the independent genre of American musical theater. The songs in these plays were meant to excite the senses and attest to the less restricting theatrical rules of the time. The possibilities of the postwar boom of plays that fell under the particular category thrilled theater managers (Bordman 17). Thus, musical theater exists at the core of the American popular culture, as it was birthed in the States and its aesthetic elements have developed throughout the years into the unique theatrical genre of modern musical with Broadway monopolizing internationally successful musical plays ever since.\(^3\)

II. And Then Came Lin-Manuel Miranda…

*Hamilton* brings together the legacy of the birth of the American nation and the aesthetics of musical theater in a most advantageous way for the show. The experimentation with *Hamilton* is twofold; first, the theatrical piece narrates the life of Alexander Hamilton through the unusual for a Broadway show medium of hip-hop/rap music and explores the issues that emerged after the Founding Fathers embarked on uncharted waters to establish a new nation. Second, the cast and ensemble of *Hamilton* are comprised almost exclusively of people of color portraying the historical figures of the Founding Fathers, a choice that was consciously made by Miranda (Miranda and McCarter 33). As critic Ben Brantley notes, *Hamilton’s* success lies in a sort of revolutionary

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immediacy that Miranda has achieved between the 21st-century American audience and the historical facts surrounding the birth of the new nation by employing a mix of sounds that are similar to the ones currently playing on the radio (“Lin-Manuel Miranda Forges Democracy through Rap”). While other musicals that deal with the Founding of America, such as 1776 (1976) by Sherman Edwards, do not stray away from the conventional musical theater sound that usually consists of show-tunes and ballads, Hamilton seeks to reach out to a wider audience by integrating hip-hop music with history and the Broadway spectacle. In fact, artist Saul Williams predicted in an interview for Rolling Stone in 2014 that: “More hip-hop musicals are inevitable if Broadway wishes to survive” (qtd. in Newman), underlining the importance of the genre’s reinvention as the audiences’ tastes change with time.\(^4\) In addition, Miranda’s artistic liberty of a black and Latinx cast portraying the Founding Fathers gained the attention of critics and audiences alike, with CNN declaring that Hamilton “embraces the history and diversity of American culture like no musical before” (Leopold), and others characterizing the casting as “brilliant” (Smith B. 520).\(^5\) Thus, Hamilton seems to have brought a breath of change for Broadway and the myth of the Founding of the American nation in general.

After its opening at the Richard Rogers Theater on Broadway on the 6\(^{th}\) of August of 2015, the show received laudatory reviews; Business Insider named Hamilton “the most

\(^4\) Hamilton is not the first hip-hop musical. In fact, “Holler If Ya Hear Me”, produced only a year before by Todd Kreidler, is another biographical musical about the life of rapper Tupac that includes hip-hop/rap sounds. Unfortunately, it did not fare well on the American stage and closed after only a month of performances. Therefore, Hamilton is the first musical fully showcasing the potential of hip-hop music on Broadway.

\(^5\) It is noteworthy that a number of people are not fond of this progressive casting, claiming that the producers discriminate against white actors by hiring actors of color almost exclusively (Kornhaber), when in reality statistics show that there are plenty of opportunities for white artists on Broadway. Meanwhile, this is not the case for actors of color.
important musical of our time” (Weller), *The New York Times* also referred to the show as a “Broadway must-see” (Piepenburg), and even critics like Brantley who initially did not understand the hype surrounding *Hamilton* became a great fan jokingly stating: “I am loath to tell people to mortgage their houses and lease their children to acquire tickets to a hit Broadway show. But “Hamilton,” directed by Thomas Kail and starring Mr. Miranda, might just about be worth it” (“Review: ‘Hamilton,’ Young Rebels Changing History and Theater”). Lastly, Christy Kuesel in an article for *The Chronicle* explains that what makes Hamilton special is that:

> it dabbles in many different fields but does not commit to one. The show combines rap, history and politics to form a musical that is not only about Alexander Hamilton himself, but also about how history is formed and what America has become. (“Exploring the Hype Behind the Broadway Hit ‘Hamilton’”)

In other words, *Hamilton* has stirred a sort of frenetic reaction among critics in the best way possible.

Several respected artists have also visited and endorsed the show; for example, Prince described *Hamilton* as “THE BEST HISTORY CLASS EVER!” on his Twitter account. Perhaps more concrete evidence of *Hamilton*’s success is the fact that tickets are sold out for the foreseeable future. This has led the producers to form multiple companies in order to perform and tour the show nationally and globally, so that everyone can have the

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6 Emphasis in the original.
7 According to the official tickets retailer website for Broadway shows: [www.broadway.com](http://www.broadway.com).
chance to partake in the Hamilton experience. The theatergoers’ love for the show with tickets being purchased by local New Yorkers, as well as visitors of the city has rendered Hamilton a sort of a tourist attraction and cultural phenomenon (Midence 11). History teachers also utilize the show in their curriculum as a means to spark their students’ interest in the Revolutionary Era of America (Weller). The show’s success transcended Broadway’s limits, as songs from the musical’s soundtrack launched in the first place of the Billboard Rap Music Charts. Finally, Hamilton has won eleven Tony Awards at the 2016 ceremony—including Best Musical, a Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album, a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and a McArthur ‘Genius’ Grant (Fierberg).

III. The Hamilton Phenomenon

A factor that played an important role in the success of Hamilton and needs to be taken into consideration is that “America was ready for Hamilton.” (Arivett 127) Both Obama’s and, later on, Trump’s presidency exposed unresolved challenges in American society and culture that date back to the Revolutionary Era, as for instance, the issue of race. In the case of Obama’s presidency, Hamilton echoed the promise of hope, acceptance, and progress that Obama’s election symbolized for the black community. The show was also in sync with Obama’s politics of celebrating and uniting the multiracial America; as a presidential candidate, Obama had stated that “there’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America.”

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8 In terms of money, Hamilton has broken the record for the most money grossed in a week on Broadway and is expected to bring billions of dollars in the bank accounts of the producers and investors. See: (a) Paulson, “‘Hamilton’ Hits a New High: The Most Money Grossed in a Week on Broadway” for The New York Times, (b) Paulson and Gelles, “‘Hamilton’ Inc.: The Path to a Billion-Dollar Broadway Show” for The New York Times.
The significance of a show like *Hamilton* lies in the fact that it portrays the Founding Fathers either as black or Latino men, posing a counter-effect to white supremacists attacking Obama’s agenda by utilizing the myth of the Founding of the new nation (McDonald). Obama was a firm supporter of *Hamilton*, inviting the cast to perform it at the White House in 2016 (“Remarks by the President at ‘Hamilton at the White House’”) after his initial attendance of the show the year before, where he commented that “the idea of America that was represented [in *Hamilton*] was more than just numbers, more than just statistics. It’s about who we are, who’s seen, who’s recognized, whose histories are affirmed.” (qtd. in Miranda and McCarter 284) All in all, *Hamilton* seems to have mirrored the progress that the American society had achieved on the issue of race by having a multiracial cast narrate these events of outmost importance for American history and being extremely successful on all fronts.

However, in 2016 the election of Donald Trump, a president who adopted a highly divisive rhetoric regarding matters of race and immigration especially, brought to the surface unsettled issues and deeply-rooted prejudices. Still, *Hamilton* continued being one of the most successful and popular plays well into the years of Trump’s administration. Thus, the show maintained its relevance and became “a commodity of resistance [to Trump’s narrative]” (Galella 364), in the sense that it can be approached as an ode to immigrants and people of color, bringing them into America’s major historical events. It is

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9 Not only is Obama a fan of the show, but there is also a remix of the song “One Last Time” from *Hamilton* available for streaming on Spotify where he sings the excerpts of George Washington’s farewell address that are included in the song, reinforcing the close proximity of the show with the Obama administration.
also noteworthy that Trump never attended the show, as opposed to Obama who was in a sense the greatest advertiser of *Hamilton* by openly showing his support.

This thesis will argue that *Hamilton* is a timeless show as it sheds light on the fact that sociopolitical issues that were relevant in the 1770s-1800s resonate in contemporary America, especially during Barack Obama’s and Donald Trump’s presidency. As Miranda has stated in an interview for *Entertainment! Tonight* channel: “My only real insight in writing the show was that all of the problems, paradoxes, and fights at the present of the Founding [of America] are still here; that’s how I was able to write about them. I was pulling for contemporary language over the same fights [sic]” (qtd. in “Lin-Manuel Miranda Talks Hamilton and Black Lives Matter”). McCarter also argues that “[*Hamilton*] draws from the breadth of America’s culture and shows its audience what we share doesn’t just dramatize Hamilton’s revolution: It continues it.” (Miranda and McCarter 11) The challenges that the Founding Fathers of America were called to resolve once the United States had become independent from England, namely the issues of race and immigration, the very idea of the American Dream, the threat of political demagogues, and gun violence that transformed from the tradition of dueling into the current phenomenon of mass shootings, are still painfully present in contemporary American society and culture. In addition, Miranda predicts in that same interview that *Hamilton* will always be relevant in some way because “it deals with issues at the root” and conflicts that are engrained in the United States’ identity and will remain pertinent in the American society unless proper action is taken.
CHAPTER ONE

“We Hold These Truths to be Self-Evident, That All Men Are Created Equal”: The Myth of Racial Equality in America

IV. “Look Around at How Lucky We Are to be Alive Right Now”, or Are We?

America has been widely acknowledged as a race-based nation. According to anti-racism activist Joseph Barndt:

Every person born in the United States or who is naturalized as a new citizen of the United States is given a racial identity and assigned to one of six primary racial groupings: white, Native American, African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American and Arab American. Each of these racial groups has been carefully and legally defined. (18)

Although racial categorization defines America as an essentially diverse and multiracial nation, the dominance of the white race has led to the marginalization and victimization of the other five racial groups on an economic, educational, social, and judicial level, to name a few (Barndt 47-48). In addition to Barndt’s argument, sociologist Benjamin Ringer notes that “America’s response to and treatment of its racial minorities have had a dual character which no single explanatory model can capture. This duality is deeply rooted in America’s past and is built into its structural and historical origins” due to the nation’s double status as colonized and a colonizer through the years (7); so, it is essential to look

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10 See Barndt’s examination on the Naturalization Act of 1790 and how it established America as a white supremacist nation (19). It should also be noted that the term racism is used in this thesis in the narrow sense of hate towards a racial group, which results to prejudice, ignorance, and discrimination (Omi and Winant 128).
into the United States’ history in order to have a better understanding of the challenges that the American society has been facing with regards to the issue of race. The unjust treatment of minorities has cultivated social conflict and tension among the racial groups. The prevailing one has always been between black and white Americans, and no similar conflict exists in any country in the world, at least not to the extent that it occurs in the American society (Ringer 13), as the experience of African Americans has been shaped by the inhumane institution of slavery.  

David Brion Davis explains that black slaves came from an unfamiliar to the European colonizers’ culture, they often outnumbered them, and the colonial settlements—many of which were located in the wilderness—were susceptible to military attacks, which is why black slavery introduced anxiety and racial repugnance in the American society (“The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution” 41). Nevertheless, this institution “provided a primary source of labor and was a major economic pillar” (Barndt 17), enabling the rise of the newly founded nation to commercial prominence.

The American Revolution inspired antislavery sentiments as a consequence of slaves bravely fighting for the Unites States’ independence alongside white soldiers (Franklin and Moss 68). Thus, the long and complicated fight towards the abolition of slavery commenced with white, as well as black spokesmen against this institution. The most fervent advocate for abolition was the religious community of the Quakers who felt that holding slaves violated their fundamental precepts of the universality of God’s love and the sinfulness of physical coercion (Steward 15). In 1779, John Laurens’ proposal to Congress to arm three thousand slaves with the promise of freedom after their service to the

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11 In the words of David Brion Davis, “race has always been the central reality of slavery” (“Slavery and the American Mind” 59).
revolutionary war, as well as the gradual adoption of emancipation laws in states like Pennsylvania in 1780 were evidence of progress (Brion Davis “The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution” 25). Alexander Hamilton, in particular, supported Laurens’ proposal and was also a member of the Manumission Society of New York, an organization that supported the gradual abolition of slavery. He remained a legal adviser of that society until his death in 1804, and the reason for his abolitionist views was the fact that he “saw [the] emancipation of the slaves as an inseparable part of the struggle for freedom [of the United States] as well as a source of badly needed manpower” (Cernow 121). Similar manumission organizations were established all over the United States, and laws that forbade the involvement of Americans in the slave trade were introduced.12

Nevertheless, America remained a nation where racial conflict persisted despite the republican rhetoric of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence with its promise of liberty and equality for all. As a matter of fact, complete abolition of slavery on a national level arrived much latter with the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865 during Abraham Lincoln’s presidency. In the meantime, proslavery sentiments rekindled, and critics believe that the Founding Fathers are partly to blame for this turn of events because they failed to incorporate the abolition of slavery in the Constitution (Steward 26). Ronald Takaki elaborates on this argument, noting that in 1787 “[the Founding Fathers] wrote … a provision that implicitly legalized slavery: the number of representatives each state would send to Congress would be determined by the number of ‘free persons’ and ‘three fifths of all other persons,’ the code phrase for slaves.” (75) Thus, the paradox known

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12 Brion Davis includes a timeline of laws and organizations introduced during the revolutionary years that paved the way for abolition (“The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution” 23-36).
as the ‘American dilemma’ took shape, as people like the Founding Fathers preached about the benefits of abolition while owning slaves at the very same time (Roediger 45). Furthermore, the Southerners, who relied heavily on agriculture and slavery, “offered public defenses of slavery” for fear that their economy would be irreparably damaged should the institution become illegal (Finkelman 95). In addition, one cannot overlook the existence of laws authorized by the Constitution, such as the Fugitive Slave Law which was passed in 1793 and required all slaves—including the freed ones—who crossed their state’s lines to be returned to their owners (Brion Davis “The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution” 29).

It is fair to say that the issue of race has historically posed a number of challenges to the American society. When Hamilton’s wife, Eliza Schuyler and her sisters’ sing that they are “lucky… to be alive right now” (Miranda and McCarter 44) during their introductory musical number, the irony of the piece cannot be missed, as the African Americans Angelica and Peggy join their Asian American sister, Eliza in a hymn to life and freedom in revolutionary America, while in real life race was a most precarious marker of social identity and slavery a black cloud hovering over the American democracy.

V. The Battle towards Racial Equality Continues

The consequences of slavery unavoidably haunt the American society to this day, regardless of the fact that slavery as an institution sanctioned by law has long seized to exist. As Moses Finley states, even a purely historical study of slavery “cannot escape being caught up in the urgency of contemporary black-white tensions.” (11) The first
decade of the twentieth century was marked by the adoption of the Jim Crow laws in the Southern States in order to limit the contact between white and black Americans, which triggered racial segregation (Ringer 224-225). The repercussions of these laws are illustrated in a study conducted by Daniel Aaronson et al. for the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago; according to their research, the government took drastic measures after the Great Depression of 1930 in order to stabilize the housing market. One of these actions was the overhaul of property appraisal practices. However, banks were not willing to lend money to the predominantly black neighborhoods because they felt it was too risky of an investment. Only after the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s did the African American community finally see significant and fundamental changes with the ratification of voting rights for the black community and the end of racial segregation and discrimination authorized by the law (Barndt 31).

Still, recent conflicts in American society suggest the perpetuation of racial discrimination and violence. Paul Finkelman observes that “remnants of proslavery thought can be found in our public discourse as well as in American’s private conversations” (111), further affirming the argument that the specter of slavery continues to affect African Americans directly or indirectly to this day. A current race battle is that of the Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and the racial profiling of African Americans by the authorities. The Black Lives Matter movement made its first appearance in 2013. However, President Donald Trump’s comments on the riots of June 2020 after the murder of George

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13 This act of discrimination, named ‘redlining’ from the outlines around black neighborhoods on the maps of Chicago excluding them from the benefits of the government’s measures, forced the black communities into a vicious circle of poverty, which in turn bred violence and adverse conditions of living. Read more on that matter and how it affects the black communities to this day in the article “In U.S. Cities, The Health Effects of Past Housing Discrimination are Plain to See” by Maria Godoy.
Floyd by police forces seemed tone-deaf with regards to the black community’s request to put an end to racial discrimination, especially by police officers. As he wrote on Twitter, troubled by the social turmoil the riots were stirring: “….these THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won’t let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts.” 14 The president’s tweet resembles the belittling of the imminent American Revolution by Bishop Samuel Seabury in Hamilton, where he sings:

Heed not the rabble who scream revolution,

They have not your interests at heart.

…Chaos and bloodshed are not a solution.

Don’t let them lead you astray.


I pray the King shows you his mercy. (49)

“The rabble” is now “these thugs” and the warnings about an angry reaction to the Revolution by the King are now threats about the violent use of military force. In addition, both Trump and Seabury seem to strive to convince Americans that riots are not the proper way to demand solutions to their problems. It is also noteworthy that people have related the show with the riots in an unexpected way; protesters have held signs with Hamilton

14 Emphasis and ellipsis in the original.
lyrics to the BLM protests of 2020 that read “History has its eyes on you” (120), George Washington’s advice to Hamilton as they were heading to war, or “This is not a moment, it’s the movement” (29), Hamilton’s prophecy about the American Revolution.  

VI. Race, Broadway, and the Positive Outcomes of *Hamilton*

Broadway has not been immune to racial discrimination, but *Hamilton* stands in juxtaposition to the Great White Way of Broadway. According to the Asian American Performers Action Coalition, 95% of the plays produced on Broadway during the 2016-17 season were written by Caucasian playwrights, only 5% of the productions were directed by minority directors, and 33% of all the available roles on the theaters of New York City were allocated to actors of color. The 2015-16 years, which were coincidentally the first two years of *Hamilton* on Broadway, were a record-breaking season for diversity on Broadway (Musbach). These statistics confirm that opportunities for people of color are limited in the mainstream theaters of New York City. Miranda has also noticed that the profile of the average theatergoer is a white lady between 45-55 years old with an income of approximately $250,000 (qtd. in Vozick –Levinson), meaning that Broadway is an activity reserved exclusively for wealthy white people from every aspect.

*Hamilton* celebrates the multiracial culture of America in every way possible, proving that the inclusion of actors of color in the show is a conscious choice aiming to make a statement, and it is not an instance of tokenism or just another marketing trick to

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15 *Hamilton’s* resonance with the BLM protests has made Miranda incredibly proud, as he stated in an interview for IMDB (qtd. in “Hamilton Cast’s Proudest Moments and Movies that Mattered Most to Them”).

sell tickets. First of all, the cast is made up mainly of people of color portraying great white men, such as the Founding Fathers George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Aaron Burr. The producers hired actors of color for the leading roles in subsequent productions of the show that followed after the departure of the original Broadway cast. However, King George III of England is portrayed by a white actor in all of the productions, further highlighting the difference between white European colonizers and multiracial Americans. In addition, the soundtrack of Hamilton is a mix of hip-hop/rap, R&B, and reggaeton music which is traditionally linked with the black community. In fact, the show was initially meant to be a concept album called The Hamilton Mixtape, which is now available for purchase, and African American rappers, like Common, were supposed to record the songs. Thus, Miranda’s concept for the musical Hamilton was towards “transcending race” from the very beginning of this endeavor (Miranda qtd. in Vozick –Levinson), as he was not interested in a historically accurate casting but in a retelling of history through hip-hop music, which facilitated the inclusion of otherwise marginalized racial minorities. The songs of the show are influenced by important African American hip-hop/rap artists, as well as iconic musicals. For example, Miranda admits that “Say No to This,” the song through which the audience learns about Hamilton’s extramarital affair is influenced by Jason Robert Brown’s musical The Last Five Years (2002), in the sense that lyrics from Brown’s show are reproduced in the song (Miranda and McCarter 179). On the other hand, “Washington on Your Side”, the song in which Hamilton’s antagonists, Burr, Jefferson, and Madison, are scheming against him, is influenced by black rapper Kendrick Lamar whose lyrics are often polysyllabic, they seem

17 The soundtrack of Hamilton recorded by the original Broadway cast is available from Atlantic Records.
to go off the rails, and the music stops to catch up to his insanely fast singing (Miranda and McCarter 200). The three ballads that the King performs are in contrast to the rest of the musical numbers, as they are influenced by pop music, and they are songs that one can easily imagine artists like The Beatles performing them. In addition to the casting and the sound, the costumes have also been designed in a way that puts forth the ethnicity of the actors. Paul Tazewell, the stylist of the show, purposefully dressed the actors in period attire from the neck down, skipping the traditional powdered wig which symbolizes the white European aristocracy (qtd in Miranda and McCarter 113). The only character who wears the powdered wig is actually the King indicating once again the differences between Europeans and Americans.
The importance of *Hamilton* for people of color, especially the black community, is best described by the original Broadway cast; Daveed Diggs, the actor who appeared in the dual role of the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson, states that the show made him feel more American, as he has always been at odds with his country. “You can only get pulled over by the police for no reason so many times before you say, ‘Fuck this’”, he says. He also states that seeing a black man portraying Jefferson or Madison or Washington when he was a kid might have changed his life, as a “whole lot of things [he] just never thought were for [him] would have seemed possible” (qtd in Miranda and McCarter 149). Okieriete Onaodowan who portrayed James Madison in the original production also notes the importance of playing “a wise, smart, distinguished future president” as opposed to the conventional roles of the “messed-up black kid” that are usually reserved for black actors (qtd. in Miranda and McCarter 149). Finally, Leslie Odom Jr., the actor who originated the role of Aaron Burr says that he has found himself to be more invested in the origins of his
nation, “something that always seemed remote from his life as a black man in America.”  
(qtd. in Miranda and McCarter 160) Miranda states that the reason he started writing plays in the first place is because he saw so little representation of people like him, a Latin American, on Broadway. This initially impeded his involvement in musical theater even though he could relate with the stories of the musicals he would attend, as it was impossible for him to land a role in a Broadway show; so, he was able to create opportunities for actors of color through his plays (qtd. in “Hamilton Cast’s Proudest Moments and Movies that Mattered Most to Them”). 18 To sum up, the actors’ comments prove that they no longer feel excluded from their nation’s history and identity due to their ethnicity, thanks to *Hamilton*.

VII. On the Other Hand, …

However, one should not be mesmerized by the spectacle and overlook the inconsistencies in the show’s approach to the issue of race, as it presents a rather glorified image of the Founding Fathers and the Early Republic. First of all, *Hamilton* misses every opportunity to make any significant remarks about the institution of slavery. Miranda acknowledges in the annotations of the libretto that Washington was a slave owner even though antislavery sentiments were growing more and more popular at the time. During the performance, however, Washington’s slave-owning status is not explicitly mentioned. When John Laurens asks: “Black and white soldiers wonder/alike if this really means

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18 *Hamilton* is not the first musical Miranda wrote that allows people of color for a chance in the spotlight. In 2008, *In the Heights*, a semi-autobiographical musical written by Miranda that takes place in the largely Latinx neighborhood of Washington Heights in New York opened on Broadway. The cast was made up mostly by actors of color, such as *Hamilton* alumnus Christopher Jackson, and the show won four Tony Awards—including Best Musical.
“freedom” as the war comes to an end, Washington answers: “Not yet” (Miranda and McCarter 122), crushing any hopes for salvation from the injustice and violence of slavery. This is the only instance that could be interpreted as a revelation of Washington’s stance on slavery. Apart from similar scarce and brief comments, the institution of slavery and the contribution of enslaved black Americans in the Revolution are not really explored to the extent that one would expect from a historical show about the American Revolution which promotes the idea of America’s multiracial make-up. In the early drafts of the play, there was a song written by Miranda that delved deeper into Washington’s reluctance to deal with the complications that the existence of slavery entailed, especially in the years when America was fighting for freedom, and it can be accessed in the libretto of the show. It included lyrics like: “WASHINGTON: Slavery’s too volatile an issue. We won’t get through it./ MADISON: Sir, we’ll keep it off your desk./ WASHINGTON: Good. Do it.” (Miranda and McCarter 212-213) The song was cut by Miranda because he felt it was packed with too much historical information, suggesting in a way that the playwright was hesitant to make any bold comments in his show on this particularly inflammable issue, possibly so that he could keep the play friendly and accessible to both black and white Americans willing to buy a Hamilton ticket.

The omission of substantial comments on slavery has made critics skeptical about the much-advertized progressiveness of casting actors of color as the Founding Fathers, even though Miranda has referred to the institution of slavery as the “original sin” of America (qtd. in Vozick –Levinson), and the actors of Hamilton have stated that they have not reconciled with the wrongdoings of the historical figures they portrayed (Miranda and
Specifically, Lyra Monteiro states that “it is problematic to have black and brown actors stand in for the great white men of the early United States in a play that does not acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought.” (62) This is why Miranda and McCarter’s boasting that “[Hamilton] is a story about America then, told by America now” (Miranda and McCarter 33) is highly precarious, as African Americans existed in the Early Republic too, but they were silenced by the oppressive institution of slavery. America has always been a multiracial nation, and this is not an occurrence of the present.

Hamilton provides multiple opportunities that could have been used for further investigation on the issue of slavery. The audience meets Hercules Mulligan, a spy who leaked British information to the Americans facilitating in this way the revolutionary war and was also a slave owner. Marvin McAllister poses the question: “According to historians, the historical Mulligan was aided in his espionage by a slave named Cato. So why not bring this enslaved figure onstage to share in the victory?” (287) The audience is led to believe that Mulligan deserves all the credits for his achievements. He sings:

I tailor spyin’ on the British government!

I take their measurements, information and then I smuggle it!

... To my brothers’ revolutionary covenant. (122)
Moreover, Sally Hemings’ character, Thomas Jefferson’s slave who bore him six children, is briefly acknowledged in the print version of the musical; however, during the performance the audience hears her name only once when Jefferson says upon his arrival to Virginia from Paris: “There’s a letter on my desk/from the president…/ Sally be a lamb, darlin’, won’tcha open it?” (152) In order to know who this ‘Sally’ person is and how significant her presence on the stage of Hamilton is, each member of the audience needs to have prior knowledge of Jefferson’s life, which is not guaranteed. This would have been an ideal chance to explore Jefferson’s hypocrisy as the man who drafted the infamous Declaration of Independence, stating “that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (“From the Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson” 663), but who was also reluctant to free his slaves throughout his life (Steward 12). Andy Blankenbuehler and Tommy Kail, the directors of Hamilton choose to address the paradox of Jefferson’s character in a more indirect way; the ensemble appears on their knees scrubbing the floor, representing Jefferson’s slaves, as he makes his entrance (Miranda and McCarter 152). Still, this is a subtle detail, and the audience might miss the opportunity to comprehend the symbolism.

The common denominator in all of the play’s criticism seems to be that the show requires deep historical knowledge from its audience, in order for them to not be swept away by the historical inaccuracies (Monteiro 64). The show depicts Alexander Hamilton in a flattering way obscuring the bleak aspects of his person. He characterizes himself, along with Laurens, Lafayette, and Mulligan, as a “bunch of revolutionary manumission
abolitionists” (27) during the performance of the musical number “My Shot”. The musical Alexander Hamilton also attacks Jefferson in one of their debates and says: “A civics lesson form a slaver. Hey neighbor. / [The Southern States’] debts are paid cuz you don’t pay for labor” (161), confirming Hamilton’s status as an antislavery advocate. However, nowhere in the play is it mentioned that Philip Schuyler, Hamilton’s father-in-law used to be one of the biggest and richest slave traders in New York, and the Schuyler family maintained their slave-owning status after Hamilton’s marriage to Eliza (Harris 81). Even more terrifying is the fact that in 1791 Hamilton advocated for the use of black enslaved children and women in the cotton mills because they were more effective, and the newly founded nation needed to gain financial substance fast (Chernow 376). It is therefore obvious that Eliza’s statement on the stage of Hamilton that her husband “could have done so much more” on the issue of slavery if he had only been alive for a longer time (281) and Hamilton’s status as a militant opponent of slavery that the show tries to establish following in Chernow’s footsteps of his characterization of Hamilton as an “unwavering” abolitionist (121) are false to say the least. Continuing with the treacherous historical inaccuracies, Donatella Galella notices that the show completely ignores the existence of Native Americans, as there is no reference to them, and the show reiterates the Manifest Destiny narrative (377) which has arguably been detrimental for the indigenous people’s rights and culture. It is lyrics like “We roll like Moses, claimin’ our promised land” (29), obviously influenced by the Puritan legacy in American political philosophy in terms of the Americans’ connection to the land as a New Eden, that add to the aforementioned narrative and completely erase the Native Americans’ legacy.
Concluding, the show may have helped people of color to realize that they are as much an inextricable part of the history of the American nation as white Americans by casting actors with the same phenotype as them and utilizing sounds that are familiar to their culture. Unfortunately, whatever radicalism *Hamilton* claims to promote regarding the issue of race and America’s multiracial identity is disrupted by its non-recognition of the essential inconsistencies and contradictions between the American revolutionary rhetoric and the reality of slavery. This paradox is still present in the contemporary American society in the form of progress which led to the election of a black president, juxtaposed to the racial discrimination that people of color in America face on a daily basis. Impactful comments on the illusion of racial equality in America are left to be desired, which is why *Hamilton* is ultimately a play that follows a more traditional narrative of American history. It represents the Founding of the United States as the greatest achievement in American history, adding to the false image of a glorious colonial America that has been carefully crafted through the years and toning down the repercussions of slavery that are obvious to this day. Nevertheless, the show fuels the conversation on the history and the challenges of the issue of race in America by having, for instance, a black Jewish actor with blatantly natural African hair portray the slave-owner Jefferson while rapping to the beat of hip-hop/rap music; the irony of it all does not go unnoticed.
CHAPTER TWO

A “Creole Bastard” Among the Founding Fathers: Immigration in America

VIII. Immigration in 1770s America

Another issue relevant to Hamilton’s time, which is also present in contemporary America, was the immigration flows, as the constant introduction of new immigration policies by the Congress proves. Hamilton’s story has a special place in this discussion, and his experience resonates with that of immigrants living in America; in the first chapter of Chernow’s biography, the reader learns that Hamilton was possibly born in Nevis to a Scottish father and a British mother, and he lived for a considerable amount of his childhood in St. Croix. Both of these places were islands in the British West Indies located in today’s Caribbean, near Puerto Rico. He eventually migrated to North America (7). Hamilton’s alleged status as an immigrant from Puerto Rico living in New York City was the main reason Miranda identified with him upon reading Chernow’s biography, as he is a Nuyorican himself. In fact, Miranda has stated that Hamilton reminded him of his father and his industrious work ethic (qtd. in Delman). Even President Barack Obama, being an immigrant himself from Hawaii and born to a Kenyan father, has stated that:

in the character of Hamilton -- a striving immigrant who escaped poverty, made his way to the New World, climbed to the top by sheer force of will and pluck and determination -- Lin-Manuel saw something of his own family, and every immigrant family. (“Remarks by the President at ‘Hamilton at the White House’”)

19 The immigration policies mentioned will be examined in the upcoming section.
However, a vital clarification needs to be made from the beginning of this chapter; in the words of Leslie Harris, “Hamilton is traveling within the British Empire as a British citizen, and thus is not an immigrant from the Caribbean in the ways that we would imagine his status today. … Hamilton is actually part of a small and elite group of migrants with significant cultural and financial capital.” (71) Hamilton might not have had a lot of money (Chernow 8), but his status as a British citizen was definitely an advantage and a distinguishing feature between him and today’s Latinx community that currently makes up most of America’s immigrants who come to the States for a better future.

Nevertheless, Miranda focuses on the issue of immigration in a way that celebrates diversity and multiculturalism inspired by the alleged mixed nationality of Hamilton. As a matter of fact, the line that receives the loudest applause in every performance of *Hamilton* is the line that Lafayette and Hamilton exchange while on the battlefield in Yorktown: “LAFAYETTE: Immigrants./HAMILTON, LAFAYETTE: We get the job done.” (121) Thus, the show brings immigrants into the history of the America underlining their significant contribution to the development and progress of the new nation. Even the stage of *Hamilton* is designed by David Korins in such a way that resembles a scaffold, paying homage to “the immigrants coming to the New World, landing on unfamiliar shores, and building cities” (Miranda and McCarter 39). It is also noteworthy that Miranda enjoyed writing songs for Lafayette. As he states in the annotations of the libretto, “it allows me to indulge something I have found to be true in my own life: Those for whom English is a second language are capable of fantastic, outside-the-box thinking with our language.”
(Miranda and McCarter 27) This is obvious in the following bilingual verse that Lafayette sings in “Aaron Burr, Sir”, the song by which his character is introduced to the audience:

Oui, oui, mon ami, je m’appelle

Lafayette!

The Lancelot of the revolutionary set!

I came from afar just to say “Bonsoir!”

Tell the King, “Casse toi!” Who’s the best?

C’est moi! (25)

In addition, an aspect that the show examines through the character of Hamilton is the racism and xenophobia that immigrants face in America. As soon as the show begins, Burr enters and acquires the role of the narrator wondering:

How does a bastard, orphan, son

of a whore and a

Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten

Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished,

in squalor,

Grow up to be a hero and a scholar? (16)
Enraged by Hamilton’s tremendous influence on the first president of the United States which, among other things, resulted in Washington following Hamilton’s advice not to get involved in the French Revolution, Jefferson, Burr, and Madison sing: “This immigrant isn’t somebody we chose./Oh! /This immigrant’s keeping us all on our toes” (200), after they have successfully come up with a plan to take Hamilton down. When they confront him about the rumors circulating that he embezzled money from the government’s funds, they tell him: “Ya best g’wan/ run back where ya come from” (229). One can only imagine how painful it must have been for members in the audience of different ethnicities to hear these words, as people of color have to deal with this exact verbal abuse by bigots on a daily basis. At that moment, Hamilton who is represented as a Latino man, is surrounded by black men attacking him. This is a powerful image reflecting the issue of racism; he is the odd one out of the four Founding Fathers on that stage (01:53:49-01:54:34). 20 In reality too, Hamilton’s mixed nationality did not sit right with his opponents. For instance, President John Adams referred to him as a “Bastard, and as much a foreigner as Gallatin” on a dinner with James McHenry, the Secretary of the Department of War at the time (qtd. in McHenry). He also allegedly called him a “Creole bastard” in private conversations (Chernow 511), though further research suggests that this is plausible but highly unlikely (Martyne). The show however reproduces these claims in a way to let its audience know about the multiple insults of Adams targeted at Hamilton’s nationality; Burr announces to the audience: “Adams fires Hamilton./ Privately calls him creole bastard in his taunts.” (224)  

20 The time frame included is from the movie Hamilton, a recorded performance of the show at the Richard Rogers Theater on June 2016 available for streaming from Disney+.
The significance of *Hamilton* for the Latinx community quickly becomes obvious. Critics have mentioned that the historical figure of Alexander Hamilton embodies the Latinx historical experience and the *longue durée* history of American immigration (McManus 266), as he was an immigrant from the Caribbean who came to the States to reinvent himself. Most importantly, Latino actors, like Anthony Ramos, assume leading roles in the show representing their community. Ensemble members, such as Jon Rua who is of Colombian descent, represent Latinx people as well. The particular choice of actors in the show in combination with the reoccurring reference to Hamilton’s alleged mixed nationality highlight Hamilton’s status as an immigrant, reinforcing the critics’ association of the first Treasury Secretary with immigrants. The show did appeal to the purely Puerto Rican audience as well; after the performances of *Hamilton* in Puerto Rico, fans have stated with tears in their eyes: “We’re a colony. … We’re treated as American, but we speak Spanish. When Lin-Manuel took out the Puerto Rican flag at the end of the performance of the show, it’s like, *Yes, we exist* [sic]” (qtd. in Pollack-Pelzner) 21, confirming the importance of the show for the Latin community globally. Daniel Pollack-Pelzner also senses that *Hamilton* resonated with its Puerto Rican audience in an intimate way than no one could have predicted; the story that the show narrates in the first Act is that of the thirteen original colonies of America trying to break free from the oppressive King George III. The audience was probably able to relate to that story because the financial oversight board for the debt of Puerto Rico, called ‘PROMESA’, appointed in 2016 by President Barack Obama imposed unbearable austerity to the already economically exhausted nation (Pollack-Pelzner). The fact that the *Hamilton* cast includes Latinx actors, in other words

21 Italics in the original.
people that Puerto Ricans can identify with, only makes it easier for them to relate to the story.

IX. On the Other Hand, … (cont’d)

But then again, *Hamilton* leaves out aspects of Hamilton’s life that would have possibly led immigrants to not want to identify with him, considering that he campaigned against immigration, the same institution that benefited him. Specifically, Hamilton initially endorsed policies that encouraged immigration, as he felt that immigrant labor was necessary for the newly founded nation to become a manufacturing power (Knott 554). However, in 1798 Hamilton supported a series of laws passed by the Congress, called Alien and Sedition Acts. These laws allowed the government to deport any ‘foreigners’ that were potentially dangerous to America, they raised the American citizen naturalization period of immigrants from five years of residency to fourteen, and they limited the freedom of press because writings that were perceived as malicious, or opposing to the President or the Congress, could be banned from been published. These measures were endorsed by the Federalists, and were taken in fear of a potential war between the United States and France, as French military invasions in Europe were successful due to political dissidents. 22 Hamilton, being a member of the Federalist Party himself, pushed for the immediate utilization of the Alien and Sedition Acts. In fact, in a letter to Jonathan Dayton, a Speaker of the House, Hamilton wrote: “I agree that the President ought to have power to send out of the country suspected foreigners” (“From Alexander Hamilton to Jonathan Dayton, 30

March 1789”). In 1802, Thomas Jefferson, who was then the President of the United States, signed a new immigration law that brought down the naturalization period to the original five years of residency, Congress proceeded with corrective legislative measures to exempt the immigrants that came to America during the Alien and Sedition years, and Hamilton’s last words on the matter “expressed his deep anxieties about an immigrant boom in the wake of Jefferson’s policy” that the latter could possibly use to his advantage in order to be elected president (Magness 506). Hamilton’s overall hatred against ‘foreigners’, his support to the Alien and Sedition laws in combination with the fact that he was not all that proud of his mixed nationality as the show would like its audience to believe, which is obvious from the words he would choose to refer to his nationality (Magness 506), have led critics to assume that Hamilton would have been one of the most fervent opponents of *Hamilton* (Smith B. 519). This goes to show that Hamilton is probably not the best representative of immigrants in America after all. 23

X. “Build the Wall!”

The issue of immigration has definitely been the most controversial topic during Trump’s presidency. His campaign for the 2016 presidential election focused on solving the issue of the immigration flows from South America. The infamous solution he proposed

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23 The reaction by the critics of the show on the performances of *Hamilton* in Puerto Rico is also interesting; activist Amárilis Pagán Jiménez wondered why San Juan should welcome a show that narrates “the history of the same damn country that has [Puerto Rico] under an unworthy colonial state and that ended us with PROMESA.” (qtd. in Pollack-Pelzner) This suggests that the otherwise timely show made a badly timed arrival to Puerto Rico, given the fact that the nation’s relations with the States were severed at the time, and the show paints a favorable—and to a great extent unrealistic—image of colonial America, adding to the idea that the United States is an admirable nation, which is far from the truth according to the racial minorities living there.
was to build a wall at the Mexican borders with the United States, have Mexicans pay for it, and deport eleven million undocumented immigrants. People would cheer during his rallies the slogan ‘Build the Wall!’ (Smith D.) King George sings on the stage of Hamilton: “They say/ The price of my war’s not a price that they’re/ willing to pay.” (127) Miranda might not have had Trump and his campaign in his mind while writing the song, as he started writing the show eight years prior to Trump’s administration; however, the particular lyrics acquire completely different connotations in 2016, as the King, who is coincidentally the only white character amongst a black and Latinx cast, sings about a war that Americans do not want to support by paying the heavy taxation imposed to them by England, similarly to Trump declaring that he wants to build a wall that Mexicans refuse to pay. It is simultaneously ironic and eerie the fact that a song about historical events that took place hundreds of years ago can be seamlessly applied to the reality of contemporary American society, in the sense that despite the widely-advertized concepts of equal opportunities for all, the American society remains an exclusive society to its core.

In 2016, the Hamilton cast addressed the Vice-President elect, Mike Pence who visited the show. Brandon Victor Dixon, the actor who played Aaron Burr at that time delivered a speech that was addressed to Pence at the end of the performance of the show, part of which was the following excerpt:

We are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope this show has inspired you
to uphold our American values and work on behalf of all of us. (qtd. in Lee and Konerman)  

Indeed, the cast’s fears were valid. In 2017, the Trump administration attempted to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, known as DACA, which was established during Obama’s presidency and allowed undocumented immigrants who arrived to the United States at childhood to stay in the country and get a job. The Supreme Court ruled against Trump’s plan (Williams and Edelman). This is just an example of the multiple attacks of Trump against immigrants.

It could be argued that Hamilton stands in juxtaposition to Trump’s anti-immigration narrative. Trump “fuelled and exploited anxiety about ethno-racial diversity in the US” that was apparently underlying the façade of acceptance with the election of a black president, and he did so “primarily by demonizing and scapegoating Mexican immigrants” (Lawrence 99). On the other hand, the most successful play in the years of his administration remained Hamilton, a theatrical piece that celebrates the multiracial America and creates a “repopularization of the positive and central role of immigration in American history and society at a time when that ideal is under significant attack.” (Brown “A Founding If You Can Keep It” 495) Hamilton, with its almost exclusively non-white cast, reminds its audience that immigrants, in this case Mexican immigrants, are not the “drug dealers, criminals, rapists”, as Trump has referred to them on multiple occasions. In fact, it reminds its audience that immigrants, much like Alexander Hamilton, have always played an important role in American history and they deserve to be acknowledged. So

24 Italics in the original.
diametrically opposed to Trump’s narrative the show is, that critics wonder if the presidential election results of 2016 was a vote against *Hamilton* and its celebration of multiculturalism and multiracialism (Ferguson). Or, if the presence of a show like *Hamilton* in combination with the fact that America has recently elected its first black president made the American population complacent in thinking that the issues that the United States have been facing in the past do not affect their lives anymore (Mead), when in reality hate towards liberal values and intolerance were brewing, as the victory of Trump revealed.
CHAPTER THREE

America, a Place “Where Even Orphan Immigrants Can Leave Their Fingerprints”

XI. The American Dream and Alexander Hamilton

Closely related to the issue of immigration is the idea of the ‘American Dream’ that the show explores. The Founding Fathers undeniably laid the groundwork for this notion, and one could argue that Alexander Hamilton was the first out of many people to achieve the Dream. As Jim Cullen states:

The key to the Declaration, the part that survives in collective memory and which underwrites the American Dream, is the opening clauses of the second paragraph: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, 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.” These words speak to us. It’s not only that they laid the foundations for sweeping social movements like the struggle to end slavery, and thus created a recognizably modern United States. These words actually structure the minutiae of everyday existence: where we go to school, who we marry, what we buy. (38)

The aforementioned words of the Declaration are inextricably linked to, and continue to inspire, the very notion of the American Dream which claims that anyone who works hard will have the opportunity to ascend the social ladder in America, regardless of their background. These words essentially shaped the Dream that still motivates countless of people to travel to the United States every year, in order to create a better life for
themselves and their families. Alexander Hamilton, in particular, came from a disadvantaged background and succeeded in reaching the American Dream, all thanks to his incredible work ethic and self-reliance. The show Hamilton highlights his inspiring success story. Burr introduces Hamilton as “Another immigrant, / comin’ up from the/ bottom” (Miranda and McCarter 17), hinting at the great things Hamilton achieved in spite of his humble beginnings. In addition, Hamilton admits to Eliza:

I don’t have a dollar to my name

An acre of land, a troop to command,

a dollop of fame.

All I have’s my honor, a tolerance for pain,

A couple of college credits and my top-notch brain. (Miranda and McCarter 76)

Nevertheless, he managed to become the most trusted person of the esteemed President George Washington (Chernow 279), and he created the financial system of the newly founded America (294). He would also have great chances at becoming President of the United States if the scandal of his extramarital affair had not put a halt to his political career. In his dying moments, the musical Hamilton reflects on his life’s journey and exclaims:

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)

His life story is a testament to the fact that it does not matter if one is an orphan and an immigrant, because in America, the land of opportunities and freedom, they can realize their wildest dreams by committing themselves to their work.

However, *Hamilton* does not acknowledge the limitations that people of color have to overcome in order to attain the American Dream of success. Thus, the show reproduces the stereotypical narrative of the American Dream without adding something revolutionary. The Founding Fathers did not seem to feel that the ‘unalienable rights’ applied to black slaves or other racial groups and social minorities, as the reality was most of them refused to free their own slaves. One would expect that the social reconstruction that the United States underwent from the revolutionary years up until the present opened up new opportunities for people of color. Barack Obama’s election certainly proved that anyone could achieve great things in contemporary America (Hill 17), as he was an immigrant and a black man who succeeded in holding the seat in the highest office of the United States for eight years. *Hamilton* with its diverse cast made obvious to its audience that the same ideas, liberties, and rights that the Founding Fathers of America fought for, namely freedom, social justice, and equal chances of financial success, can finally be accessed by people of color. Nevertheless, there is a growing belief in contemporary American society that racial
discrimination is worsening, and, as a result, this inhibits the racial minorities’ ability to participate in the American Dream, especially African Americans’ (Hochschild 55).

XII. That Same Dream, Today

In fact, the very nature of the American Dream remains uncertain in contemporary America, especially during Donald Trump’s administration. As soon as Trump announced his presidential candidacy, he stated: “Sadly, the American Dream is dead. But if I get elected president, I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before and we will make America great again.” (qtd. in Wolack and Peterson) According to him, his win at the election of 2016 symbolized that: “the American Dream is back bigger, better and stronger than ever before.” (qtd. in Wolack and Peterson) However, his discriminatory attacks reinforced the deep-rooted bias regarding the social status of immigrants and people of color in American society making the socioeconomic gap between the racial minorities and white Americans more obvious than ever. Therefore, it is safe to say that Trump is an advocate of an elitist version of the American Dream, much like the Founding Fathers, quite contrary to the inclusive narrative that Hamilton represents. In addition, not only do people of color believe they have been handed unequal opportunities at succeeding in the Dream, but recently white Americans also feel pessimistic and disheartened about achieving it, according to an article in The Washington Post (Wolack and Peterson). This can be interpreted as an overall failure of the American Dream during these contemporary times and a need to reinvent that idea.
CHAPTER FOUR

“No One Else Was in the Room Where It Happened”: A Brief Story on
Political Demagogues in America

XIII. An Old Song

“Corruption’s such an old song that/ we can sing along in harmony” (Miranda and McCarter 137), says the musical Alexander Hamilton during his speech at the Constitutional Convention, echoing the idea of the historical Hamilton that immorality is the single consistent thing in the history of politics. A play like Hamilton that discusses the trials and tribulations of politics and how political systems come to life could not have avoided dealing with this issue. As a matter of fact, the historical Hamilton warned the American population, who was trying to establish a democratic political system after becoming independent, against demagogues. On that matter, he said in a debate in defense of the Jay Treaty in 1795:

It is only to consult the history of nations to perceive, that every country, at all times, is cursed by the existence of men, who, actuated by an irregular ambition, scruple nothing which they imagine will contribute to their own advancement and importance. In monarchies, supple courtiers; in republics, fawning or turbulent demagogues, worshipping still the idol power wherever placed, whether in the hands of a prince, or of the people, and trafficking in the weaknesses, vices, frailties, or prejudices of the one or the other. (“The Defense”)
In this excerpt, Hamilton castigates politicians with populist views who are characterized by passion, and not reason, and who manage to use the passion they exude to their advantage by misleading their followers in a way that benefits their political career. Hamilton possibly had Thomas Jefferson, his political opponent and life-long enemy, in mind when delivering this speech, as he thought of Jefferson as nothing more than an overzealous politician who, along with populists like Thomas Paine, believed that the people can do no wrong (Knott 558). Stephen Knott also notes that The Federalist Papers, written by Hamilton and James Madison defending the Constitution, contain sixty-six different mentions of the word ‘passion’ or ‘passions’, and it seems that Madison and Hamilton agree on the debilitating and potentially dangerous effect of passion without reason in politics, despite their differences in opinion on other matters (559). So horrified was Hamilton about citizens poisoned by immoral politicians interfering in one way or another with the novel democratic system of the United States that he referred to the American population as “a great beast” at a dinner party he attended in New York soon after the Constitution was adopted (qtd. in Chernow 398). This comment of his gained him the characterization of a closeted ‘monarchist’ by Thomas Jefferson and his followers for years to come (Chernow 398). What Hamilton probably meant with this remark was that people are an imponderable factor in politics and have great power in their hands that populists can exploit ruining democracy in the process. To conclude, Hamilton insisted on the importance of reason in politics, he went to extremes to defend it, and believed that the democratic system of America would collapse and promote demagogues if the politicians’ actions were not characterized by reason.
Almost two hundred years since Alexander Hamilton’s death, his fears proved to be valid, as democracy in the American society currently seems to be unstable and spoiled by demagogues. As Knott observes, “sadly, in contemporary America, the viability of a candidate for high office is frequently determined by the passion they bring into the political “arena” and the passion they unleash from their followers.” (559) This was the case in the 2016 presidential elections. It is commonly acknowledged what Trump lacks in reason and political skills, he makes up in rhetoric. He managed to tap into the fears of his followers that stem from racist beliefs and blow them out of proportion by utilizing passionate language. This passion eventually granted him victory in the 2016 elections (Lawrence 86). During the four years of his administration, journalists were called to respond to Trump’s scaremongering tactics by bringing in facts and reason to the table in their attempt to preserve the democratic political system of America.\(^{25}\) In addition, former National Security Agent, John Bolton published his book named *The Room Where It Happened* (2020), obviously influenced by the musical number “The Room Where It Happens” in *Hamilton*. In his memoir, Bolton writes about his days serving Donald Trump. In the very first pages of his book, he states: “I came to understand that he believed he could run the Executive Branch and establish national-security policies on instinct, relying on personal relationships with foreign leaders, and with made-for-television showmanship always top of mind” (2), encapsulating with these words the essence of Trump’s political

\(^{25}\) For instance, read about the massive mural that was installed in Soho, New York prior to the 2020 elections, featuring about twenty thousand lies on topics such as immigration that Trump has presented as facts in his speeches or interviews during the years of his administration. His statements have been fact-checked by journalists of *The Washington Post* (Gleason).
tactics during his administration. The song from *Hamilton* that inspired Bolton’s book title is rather interesting; in that musical number, Burr sings about the fact that common people lay in obscurity with regards to what goes on behind closed doors at meetings between politicians, in which they decide on laws that affect American citizens’ everyday life and future. He sings:

No one really knows

How

The game is played.

……………………

We just

Assume that it

happens.

But no one else is in

The room where it

happens. (187)

In that same musical number, when the ensemble of *Hamilton*, possibly representing the American population, sings: “We want our leaders to save the day-”, Burr adds: “But we don’t get a say in what/ they trade away” (190), hinting at the immoral things people in power do in secrecy at the expense of the people they are supposed to serve. Finally,
Trump’s legacy will be that of a president twice impeached, as he faced legal repercussions about obstruction of Congress and abuse of power in his first trial, and incitement of insurrection in his second impeachment (Brooks). The 2021 attack at the Capitol by Trump supporters, a bleak day for democracy in America indeed, renders the words of the historical figure of Hamilton more relevant than ever. It further proves that he was right about warning the American population against politicians with excessive zeal but no reasoning skills and claiming that people are a powerful and unpredictable ‘beast’ that demagogues can trick into actions that will advance their political careers by praising them and evoking their passion.
CHAPTER FIVE

“Time to Get Some Pistols and a Doctor on Site”: Gun Violence in America

XV. “Can We Agree that Duels are Dumb and Immature?”

Lastly, an issue still relevant in contemporary America that Hamilton touches upon is gun violence. Miranda has stated that “it’s not an accident that every character in our show dies as a result of gun violence that’s still a plague in our country.” (qtd. in “Lin-Manuel Miranda Talks Hamilton and Black Lives Matter”) In Hamilton’s time, the particular social issue existed in the form of the tradition of dueling. A French visitor of the United States had observed that “The rage for dueling [in America] has reached an incredible and scandalous point.” (qtd. in Chernow 117) This practice might have been punishable in New York City; however, young men wanting to defend their honors in this savage way would perform duels in places where the law was more lenient, such as New Jersey (Chernow 700). Dueling was in fact a common practice in the 1770s, so much so that Miranda conducted his research on the rules of quarrelling from a sort of handbook before referring to them in the musical number “Ten Duel Commandments”.26 In that song, John Laurens challenges General Charles Lee in a duel because the latter badmouthed George Washington after he was discharged for disgracing the American army in the Battle of Monmouth. The seconds in command in that duel were Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton to Lee and Laurens respectively. The duty of this category of people was to try and reach a peace between the two fighting men via negotiations. Burr asks Hamilton: “Can

26 It is mentioned in the annotations of the libretto that the handbook on the rules of dueling Miranda referred to while composing “Ten Duel Commandments” is titled Affairs of Honor (2001) written by Joanne Freeman (Miranda and McCarter 99).
we agree that duels are dumb and/ immature?” in his attempt to make amends, but fails miserably. Hamilton responds: “But your man has to answer for his words, Burr. /…how many men died/ because Lee was inexperienced and ruinous?” to which Burr, clearly defeated, answers half to himself: “Okay, so we’re doin’ this.” (Miranda and McCarter 100) Charles Lee gets injured. This duel never actually happened in the way that it is represented in the show, but it serves the purpose of introducing the audience to the reoccurring motif of dueling and its rules. According to Miranda, “Ten Duel Commandments” is one of the most complex numbers of the show to be choreographed, as the narrator constantly changes among the four men, revealing that quarrelling was indeed normalized as a way of life in the 1770s (99). Later in the show, Philip, Hamilton’s son challenges George Eacker, a statesman in a duel because “He disparaged [his] father’s legacy in front of/ a crowd” during his speech for the celebrations of the Fourth of July (Miranda and McCarter 245). Eacker accepts the challenge and strikes a fatal shot at Philip (246). This is how Hamilton lost his son at a very young age three years prior to his own death in a duel as well. Philip’s parents mourn the loss of their oldest son in the musical number “It’s Quiet Uptown” (253-254), arguably one of the most heart wrenching songs in the show.

An actual duel took place between James Monroe and Alexander Hamilton in 1793. It is not included in the show but it is worth mentioning, as it reveals the complex relation between Burr and dueling. Hamilton suspected that Monroe, a politician, a Founding Father, and future president of the United States, had leaked the information about his

27 Burr was never the second in command to Charles Lee; however, Hamilton did accompany John Laurens in the duel in the way that the show suggests. Chernow suspects that it must have been a formative experience for young Hamilton seeing a man he looks up to defending his name in a duel (117).
extramarital affair with Maria Reynolds. After a heated correspondence between the two men, they decided to resolve their issues in a duel. Burr, who was the second in command to Monroe, actually managed to put an end to the affair via negotiations, and the two men did not end up going to the fields (Chernow 540-541). It seems that Burr was never fond of this barbaric practice. Years later, he challenged John Barker Church, a politician in a duel for using improper language when referring to his name (Chernow 589). However, Chernow implies that Burr purposefully complicated the process by bringing the wrong size of bullets for the guns he brought for them to fight, and then he had to perform an intricate procedure to get the bullets to fit. The gun, of course, misfired, and none of the two men got injured. This resulted in the de-escalation of the fight, and Burr and Church were able to work out their differences in a civilized manner (Chernow 590-591). This suggests that Burr would have agreed with his musical counterpart that dueling is “dumb” and “immature”.

Burr, however, must have forgotten all about his aversion to the custom of dueling when he challenged Hamilton to a fatal fight in 1804. After years of friction and stepping on each others’ toes in the political sphere, the two men decided to put an end to their disagreements once and for all with a duel. In the show, Hamilton says to Burr: “You stand only for yourself. /It’s what you do/ I can’t apologize because it’s true”, to which Burr answers: “Then stand, Alexander. / Weehawken. Dawn. /Guns. Drawn.” Finally, the two men sing the closing line that it is expected to be found in letters challenging the other person to a duel: “I have the honor to be/ your obedient servant” (267). They visit the
famous dueling ground of Weehawken at dawn, and Burr strikes a fatal shot at Hamilton.

He appears to repent for his actions and sings addressing to the audience:

Now I’m the villain in your history.

I was too young and blind to see.

I should have known.

I should have known

The world was wide enough for both

Hamilton and me. (275) 28

In reality too, Burr was not all that proud about his actions. In an entry to his private journal he kept while he was exile in Europe, he wrote: “It would seem that every incident of my life in known throughout Germany. Duels, treasons, speeches, gallantries.” (396) The events of the actual duel are blurry to this day because both men fired their guns, which means that Hamilton was planning to kill Burr as well. Still, historians are uncertain as to who fired first (Chernow 703). The unalterable truth and facts are that Hamilton died and left Eliza in great financial debt, all while having to raise seven children on her own, further proving that nothing good stems from gun violence.

XVI. “A Suffering Too Terrible to Name”

28 Repetition in the original. Miranda’s lyrics were probably inspired by Burr’s actual words on that matter, where he said on a conversation with one of his friends: “Had I read Sterne more and Voltaire less, I should have known the world was wide enough for both Hamilton and me”, referring to a scene in Laurence Sterne’s book, *Tristan Shandy* (qtd. in Chernow 722).
Nowadays, gun violence in America takes the form of mass shootings. The United States hold the record for most civilians owning guns, as well as the bleak record for gun-related killings, including suicides committed using a gun. Forty percent of American citizens claim to either own or live in a household with a gun, and more than 110 mass shooting have occurred since 1982. In the show, when Washington announces to Hamilton that he will retire from politics, he sings:

Like the Scripture says:

“Everyone shall sit under their own vine and

fig tree

And no one shall make them afraid.”

They’ll be safe in the nation we’ve made. (210)

This is the exact Bible verse Washington actually quoted in a letter to a Jewish community that had immigrated to Rhode Island to seek relief from persecution, wanting them to know he was a firm believer that everyone should be able to find refuge in America (Miranda and McCarter 208). The verse Washington sings prior to his Farewell Address in Hamilton resonates with the events of the summer of 2015, the night before the full company of the show reassembled, as a white-supremacist gunned down nine worshippers at the Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, one of the oldest black churches in the South, violating the promise that everyone can be safe in the United States regardless of

29 The statistics presented in the following two paragraphs are derived from BBC’s article in 2019, titled “America’s Gun Culture in Charts.”
their backgrounds (Miranda and McCarter 208). Christopher Jackson who portrayed George Washington at that time commented on the incident and said that the musical number “One Last Time”, in which the aforementioned lyrics are included, “encapsulated the thought that the struggle continues. The idea is perfect, the execution is not. It’s never been perfect” (qtd. in Miranda and McCarter 208), acknowledging the gap between the idealistic post-racial America that is represented on the stage of *Hamilton*, the hope that Washington sings about in that song on one hand, and the reality of hate crimes with a race bias committed in contemporary American society on the other.

Unfortunately, this was not the last time that a mass shooting affected a performance of *Hamilton*. On the night of the 2016 Tony Awards, everything seemed to look up for the producers of the show, as *Hamilton* had earned the record-breaking sixteen Tony nominations—eleven out of which, it actually won. Fans of the award show gave to the 2016 ceremony the nickname ‘Hamil-Tonys’ because everything pointed to the fact that *Hamilton* would be the biggest winner of the night. However, one of the deadliest mass shootings took place earlier on that very same night in a homophobic attack at the Pulse Bar, a gay bar in Orlando, which overshadowed the usual glitz and glamour of the ceremony. The cast performed the musical number “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)” from the show without the guns that are usually part of their costumes in honor of the fifty victims of the shooting, and Miranda accepted his award for Best Original Score delivering an emotional speech with a sonnet, part of which was the following verse:

This show is proof that history remembers
We lived through times when hate and fear seemed stronger;

We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrances that hope and love last longer

And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love cannot be killed or swept aside.

I sing Vanessa’s [Miranda’s wife] symphony, Eliza tells her story

Now fill the world with music, love and pride. (qtd. in Melas) ³⁰

The only hopeful statistic is that the majority of Americans, especially the young ones, is dissatisfied with the laws on gun control and demand stricter regulations to be implemented. This makes senses if one considers the fact that young Americans are the ones affected by gun violence the most, as school shootings are a common occurrence in America.

³⁰ Repetition in the original.
CONCLUSION, or


All in all, Hamilton: An American Musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda is one of those tremendously impactful plays that write and re-write history. First of all, people are interested in Broadway and musical theater again, as the sudden trend of film adaptations of various musicals by Hollywood which followed the release of and the fascination with the movie Hamilton proves (Soloski). Furthermore, an unexpected consequence of Hamilton was people sympathizing with Aaron Burr. Critics began to examine his life in a more objective manner acknowledging the good things he did for the United States, and Burr’s status as the original traitor of America started fading, thanks to Hamilton humanizing his character and representing him as somebody who was more than just the murderer of Alexander Hamilton (Wallace). Lastly, Hamilton will remain the face of the American ten-dollar bill, thanks to his newly discovered fame that followed Hamilton. In fact, Miranda was one of the people who complained when the President suggested the first Treasury Secretary to be removed from the ten-dollar bill and an important American female figure to replace him (Paulson “Hamilton May Stay on the $10 Bill”).

Hamilton promotes the idea that in contemporary America people of color can finally have access to the myth of the Founding and the liberties that the Fathers wanted for white Americans, even though this is false and misleading, as the persistence of racial discrimination in the United States proves. Therefore, one has to wonder whether Hamilton can turn into a powerful tool in the hands of people with originalist views, as the main
argument against this ideology is that the Founding Fathers did not recognize the unalienable rights and liberties they fought for in the Revolution to people of color or other social minorities. In addition, a future where children tell their history teachers that the historical figure they admire the most is Thomas Jefferson because he is their favorite character from *Hamilton* is plausible and highly precarious. One must not forget that Jefferson claimed to have never met an African American that “had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration” ("Notes on the State of Virginia" 670), meaning that he did not believe black people were capable of having complex thoughts similar to the ones of white Americans. This is a good enough reason why children, especially black youth, should not identify with him, even though *Hamilton* makes it really tempting. Miranda acknowledges the power that a historical play like *Hamilton* has on the collective memory of the events of America’s history. In an interview, he states: “I’m theater people, and theater people, the only history they know is the history they know from other plays and musicals…So to that end, I felt an enormous responsibility to be as historically accurate as possible, while still telling the most dramatic story possible.” (qtd. in Delman)

However, it is unfair to demand from a musical to substitute history lessons and/or one’s independent research, and the audiences need to remember that it is virtually impossible for a show to represent an accurate and well-rounded account of historical events, even for a lengthy play like *Hamilton* that runs for approximately three hours. This is the case for multiple reasons; for example, Miranda’s words hint at the fact that a playwright needs to compose an entertaining and engaging show. Otherwise, hardly anyone would be interested in buying tickets for a historical play, and *Hamilton* would have never
been established as a cultural phenomenon or reached such a wide audience so as to transmit the important messages the producers wanted to send out to the American society by having a multiracial cast singing about the history of America to the rhythm of hip-hop/rap music.

The sociopolitical issues that *Hamilton* explores are more relevant than ever in contemporary America. These issues involve the subject of race that still dichotomizes the American population, immigration, the very definition of the American Dream that currently needs reinvention, political demagogues, and dueling that translates into the current phenomenon of gun violence and a long-overdue fight for gun control. *Hamilton* also makes some brief comments on the influence of Alexander Hamilton, as the man who created the financial system of America, in the economy of the modern nation of the United States and the constant struggle for equality between the two genders. ^31^ The Schuyler sisters repeat the famous lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”, and Angelica adds: “And when I meet Thomas Jefferson,… I’m 'a compel him to include/ women in the sequel!” (Miranda and McCarter 44) Angelica’s comment echoes Abigail Adams, President John Adams’ wife words that she wrote in a letter to her husband after the signing of the Declaration, where she encouraged him to: “remember the ladies” (qtd. in Hubbard-Brown 30). Nowadays, women still have to fight for their basic human rights, like equal pay to their male counterparts. It is also noteworthy that the United States have never elected a female president to this day. *Hamilton*’s relevance extends to the other side of the pond as well.

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^31^ For an analysis on the influence of Hamilton in the current financial system of the United States, see the articles by Stringham and O’Malley.
“What comes next?/ You’ve been freed”, sings King George after realizing that there is nothing else he can do to persuade America to stay annexed to England (Miranda and McCarter 127). When these lyrics were performed in front of the London audience, Miranda could see a grimace of discomfort forming in the faces of its members, as Britain was facing uncertainty with regards to its departure from the European Union, commonly known as ‘BREXIT’ (qtd. in “Lin-Manuel Miranda Talks Hamilton and Black Lives Matter”). However, racism, immigration, and immoral politicians are not issues exclusive to the American society; so, maybe it is about time we started examining the comments that Hamilton makes on these issues in general, and to not constantly consider the show as social commentary for politics in America. This is exceptionally hard, given the fact that Miranda has stressed in his interview for Entertainment! Tonight channel that Hamilton “hits different” depending on what is going on in the United States or who is in the Oval Office and the fact that the same issues that have been tormenting the American society in the 1770s are more relevant than ever in contemporary America. For the time being, America seems to be in dire need of introspection, and Miranda’s Hamilton might actually turn out be utterly helpful in this process.
Works Cited


@realDonaldTrump. “….these THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won’t let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank You!” Twitter, 29 May 2020, 12:53 a.m., https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1266231100780744704.


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