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Hamilton and the American Promise

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“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?” (Miranda). Thus begins Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton: An American Musical*. The narrator, Aaron Burr, introduces founding father Alexander Hamilton to audiences who may have previously only heard about him once or twice in their American history classes. With the historical Hamilton’s relative lack of notoriety in mind, it makes sense that the start of the musical would function as an introduction for this previously little-known Founding Father. However, the introduction is not simply an educational tool: the lyrics set the aspirational tone for the rest of the musical.

For *Hamilton*, that tone is centered on the American Dream. For the purposes of this paper, I use the soundtrack as my chief set of evidence due to its accessibility and widespread nature. Based on this soundtrack, I argue that Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* portrays the ideals of the Dream and ultimately rebrands it as the American promise. This promise strives to fulfill what the American Dream historically has not: it draws immigrants and people of color into the utopian ideal of equal opportunity in a meritocracy. The American promise argues for equality by utilizing American history, rap and hip hop, and multiracial casting. The combination of these elements renders *Hamilton* a multicultural figure who stands as an example of what that promise can--and should--achieve. This essay will outline the ways that *Hamilton* promotes the promise in conjunction with Ron Chernow’s biography, which the musical was based on. Due to the fact that I will be discussing both Hamilton the founding father and Hamilton the Broadway character, I will occasionally distinguish the two using “the historical Hamilton” and “the musical Hamilton.”

The first section of this thesis describes the origins of the American Dream and how it compares with the American promise. The second section discusses black and immigrant thinkers as they attempted to reconcile the American Dream and their own marginalization. This section also details Miranda’s use of rap, the rap American Dream, and how Miranda builds Hamilton’s gangsta persona in order to fold black people into his narrative. Finally, the fourth section discusses the disconnect between the American promise and the reality of the founding fathers. The purpose of these sections is to ultimately show how Miranda, as the playwright of this musical, uses all of these elements to portray his message of an inclusive American Dream in *Hamilton*.

Due to the nature of this topic, this thesis also discusses the separation between historical facts and what the musical portrays. This discussion is not merely about Miranda getting certain historical facts wrong. Instead, it is an evaluation of how the American promise fares in the context of America’s founders and their ideas about equality. As other critics have pointed out, Miranda’s vision of the promise necessitates willful historical blindness. His

message is carried through the depiction of white men who, for all of their accomplishments, were either complicit in or directly participated in slavery, xenophobic policies, other racially influenced forms of discrimination. As a text, *Hamilton* assumes that we are in an era where we can try to move past the implications of our Founding Fathers being problematic and even use them to act as the voice for inclusivity. *Hamilton* obscures the problematic roles that they played historically and misrepresents them as people who made way for the American promise, rather than people who actively tried to inhibit it. Because these implications are glossed over in the musical *Hamilton*, its promise becomes complicated--and those complications need to be discussed if one is going to talk about the message that Miranda is sending.

In fact, *Hamilton* and its promise has the potential to become a “if he can do it, so can you” message that does not address institutional racism or xenophobic policies. *Hamilton* could easily be viewed as a musical that places the culpability for a lack of success on the individual rather than on a system that was set in place by the country's founders. However, a closer look at Miranda's discussions about the American promise, the *Hamilton Mixtape*, and Miranda's own activism in immigration, reveal American promise to be something that has not yet been realized; in fact, the musical shows what we can achieve if we work toward it.

The American Dream Becomes the American Promise

As Lawrence R. Samuel asserts in *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, the American Dream is more than just an idea. It is a “powerful philosophy or ideology...[it is] thoroughly woven into the fabric of everyday life. It plays a vital, active role in who we are, what we do, and why we do it” (2). The Dream is ubiquitous: politicians latch onto it for speeches about how they will help their voters achieve it; in literature, authors such as Horatio Alger reinforce it while others like F. Scott Fitzgerald challenge it; it is present in movie stars' poverty-ridden backstories, reality TV shows where hardworking, deserving people are generously rewarded for their toils, and other forms of dominant media. Samuel asserts, “From Jay Gatsby to Jay-Z, the landscape of the American popular culture has been strewn with fragments of the Dream, the desire to beat the odds by making full use of our God-given talents perhaps our most compelling story” (9). Samuel's description of the Dream's “fragments” is fitting, considering that those pieces of the American Dream manifest differently among particular races, classes, and creeds, as I will discuss later in this paper.

Although the phrase “American Dream” was coined in 1931, the idea that a man should be allowed to rise in life based on his merits and his hard work is one that was conceptualized even before then. For example, in *The Radicalism of*

the American Revolution, Gordon Wood describes how, in the early 1800s, “ordinary people, hundreds of thousands of them, began working harder to make money and “get ahead.” Americans appeared to be a people totally absorbed in the pursuit of financial success. He says that “‘Enterprise,’ ‘improvement,’ and ‘energy’ were everywhere extolled in the press” (Wood 325). Widespread class mobility that had not been available in Europe was now found in America. Once it was recognized that mobility could be achieved by the lower and middle classes, people pursued it. Wood’s description of people seeking “improvement” directly connects to the American Dream (325).

While the 1931 version of the Dream coincides with Wood’s idea of “improvement,” James Truslow Adams, who is credited with being the first to both coin and formally define the American Dream, puts more emphasis on the betterment of people than the “individual pursuit of money” (Wood 325). In his book *The Epic of America*, Adams formally defines the Dream as

A vision of a better, deeper, richer life for every individual, regardless of the position in society which he or she may occupy by the accident of birth. It has been a dream of a chance to rise in the economic scale, but quite as much, or more than that, of a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom. With this has gone the hope of bettering the physical conditions of living, of lessening the toil and anxieties of daily life. (qtd. in Samuel 13)

Adams’ version of the American Dream is not focused on finances, but instead the opportunity for personal improvement. The advancement of a person’s financial circumstances is rendered a happy consequence of that improvement. Like Miranda’s American promise, this iteration of the Dream is one where anyone has the chance to improve themselves. Adams argues that one’s position in life should not dictate the opportunities that he has and his potential for greatness. Over time, Adams’ vision of a land of self-improvement and Woods’ acknowledgement of people working hard for class elevation has become a distinctly American narrative, one that is embodied in the American Dream.

However, the American Dream manifests itself differently among particular races, classes, and creeds. A major reason for the fragmentation of the American Dream is the colorblind meritocracy that it idealizes is not a reality. For example, homeownership, which is one of the central symbols of the achievement of the American Dream, has historically been denied to minorities. African-American author and thinker Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations” details how, from the 1930s to the 1960s, blacks were denied legitimate mortgages. Instead, they were left with men who would “sell homes at inflated prices and then evict families who could not pay—taking their down payment and their monthly installments as profit. Then they’d bring in another black family,

rinse, and repeat” (Coates). And though these practices may seem irrelevant to overall success in America, Coates drives his point home: “In Chicago and across the country, whites looking to achieve the American dream could rely on a legitimate credit system backed by the government. Blacks were herded into the sights of unscrupulous lenders who took them for money and for sport” (Coates). The effects of these practices are still felt: in a recent report, the Economic Policy Institute found that

Fifty years after the historic Kerner Commission identified “white racism” as the key cause of “pervasive discrimination in employment, education and housing,” there has been no progress in how African Americans fare in comparison to whites when it comes to homeownership, unemployment and incarceration...In some cases, African Americans are worse off today than they were before the civil rights movement.” (Jan)

This specific historical contradiction to the ideals of the American Dream may not be well known, but this, along with other social inequalities, has led to disillusionment.

Ever since it was coined, there has been recurring rhetoric of the death of the American Dream. After Robert Kennedy, who some saw as embodying the American Dream due to his individualism and self-improving nature, was assassinated, some feared that the American Dream had died with him (Samuel 78). Later in the 1960s, *New York Times* writer Frederic Morton began to notice that people had “not succeeded in achieving the standard Dream’s goal to ‘get there’ and enjoy the good life. More important, perhaps, affluence had not brought happiness even for those people who had ‘gotten there,’ leading to a sea change in the American Dream” (Samuel 78-79). Thus, from the death of important figures to personal observation, there are a lot of factors that enable the questioning of the American Dream. With these questions about the American Dream in mind, Miranda’s rebranding of the American Dream as the American promise is an artistic choice that enables his message to be portrayed without the baggage of the former term.

In *Hamilton*, the use of the phrase “American promise” could easily be overlooked. That exact terminology is used only once in the entire musical, during Thomas Jefferson’s song “What’d I Miss.” In “What’d I Miss,” Jefferson is introduced to the audience by Burr, who sings, “But someone’s gotta keep the American promise, You simply must meet Thomas. Thomas!” (Miranda). It is logical to assume that, the context of his duties as ambassador to France, the “American promise” that Jefferson has to keep is America’s vow to help France with their own revolution. In fact, Jefferson talks about this promise again in “Cabinet Battle #2,” emphasizing America’s treaty with France. It is also logical to assume that this line is here because “promise” rhymes with “Thomas.”

However, I argue that the presence of the American promise in “What’d I Miss” is not just an allusion to French-American relations: it is a key to understanding the role of the American Dream in *Hamilton*. The placement of the American promise in Jefferson’s song is no accident. The promise is set in the song with the founding father whose ideals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are frequently invoked to defend people’s right to chase the American Dream.

Furthermore, the American promise alludes to two specific, pivotal, and racial moments in America: Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1965 and Barack Obama’s 2008 speeches, both titled “The American Promise.” The first speech occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. On March 7, 1965, while marching for voting rights, nearly 600 civil rights activists in Selma, Alabama were brutally beaten by police, the Klu Klux Klan, and civilians. After the event was televised and watched by audiences around America, the outrage forced Lyndon B. Johnson to move forward with a voting bill to Congress that would try to remove impediments to the black vote. During the speech, he states,

To deny a man his hopes because of his color or race or his religion or the place of his birth is not only to do injustice, it is to deny Americans and to dishonor the dead who gave their lives for American freedom...What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too...And...we... *shall*...overcome. (qtd. in May)

Here, it can be argued, “hopes” and “the full blessings of American life” make reference to the American Dream. Consequently, the argument that a person’s “color or race or...religion” should not stop them from exerting “effort” to achieve these things render Johnson’s speech a prototype of the inclusive American promise that Miranda would later conceptualize in *Hamilton* (qtd. in May). Furthermore, Johnson’s attempt to spin the civil rights movement as not only a black movement, but an *American* movement, gestures to one of the ultimate goals of *Hamilton*: including minorities and immigrants into the American narrative while simultaneously asserting their American identity.

Forty-three years after Johnson’s speech, Barack Obama gave his own American promise speech after receiving the Democratic Party’s nomination for the presidency. “The American Promise” was delivered at the 2008 Democratic National Convention on the 45th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Addressing his audience, Obama defines the American promise as “the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation” (Obama). He adds that our government “should ensure opportunity not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every American who’s *willing to work*” (Obama, emphasis added). Once again, inclusivity and the

American Dream are folded into this speech. The link between this speech and *Hamilton* cannot be ignored, especially considering the close relationship between Miranda and Obama that developed after *Hamilton* was released.¹

However, there is one major difference between these two speeches. In the context of the Civil Rights era, Lyndon Johnson emphasizes inclusivity. Obama's speech, on the other hand, is more so focused on the aspects of the American Dream that are tied to being "willing to work" (Obama). In both Obama's speech and *Hamilton*, there is also a consistent emphasis on hard work being tied to the desire "rise up" in life (Miranda). In fact, hard work is nearly as integral to the American promise as it is to the American Dream. As shown through Alexander Hamilton's workaholic characterization, in order to participate in the American promise, you must be working. Other themes that the American promise shares with the American Dream are the bootstraps narrative and rugged individualism, both of which emphasize people using their gifts to lift themselves out of their circumstances.

Reflecting this idea, Alexander Hamilton is constantly moving. In the song "Alexander Hamilton" he is "ready to beg, steal, borrow or barter" for a chance (Miranda). From the young age of fourteen, Chernow contends that the historical Hamilton recognized that he was "caught in the lower reaches of a rigid class society with a small chance of mobility" and wrote and educated himself in order to move out of it (30). At this same age, Laurens tells the audience in *Hamilton*, "they placed [Hamilton] in charge of a trading charter" (Miranda). And while these statements are meant to convey that Hamilton was brilliant enough to undertake such a task at a young age, it reveals how, even early on, the narrative of work was implemented into his life. Even in the very first song, "Alexander Hamilton," Hamilton has multiple occupations: he is "a scholar," a poet who "wrote his first refrain," and a clerk "for his late mother's landlord" (Miranda).

Not only is the connection between hard work and the American promise emphasized both historically and in the musical, it is also presented in extremes. Whether he is helping win the Revolutionary War or founding the U.S. Coast Guard, Hamilton throws himself into his work. On multiple occasions in Chernow's biography, Hamilton pushes himself to exhaustion, endangering his health. While the health problems that Hamilton's break-neck work ethic caused are not evident in the musical, there are hints of how far he pushes himself. As a young person, he "start[s] retratin' and readin' every treatise on the shelf" (Miranda). When he gets older, he "write[s] day and night like [he's] running out of time" (Miranda). His "writing day and night like he's running out of time"

¹ Miranda and his cohort have repeatedly performed at the White House. The epilogue of *Hamilton: The Revolution*, is also seemingly dedicated to Obama. I detail this relationship during the conclusion of this thesis.

becomes a repeated refrain in the musical as people both admire and hate him (Miranda).

However, this approach to labor is not entirely praised in the musical. In “Alexander Hamilton,” the chorus laments, “You never learned to take your time!” (Miranda). There is even a whole song, “Take a Break,” that admonishes Hamilton to stop working for a while and enjoy his family. Finally, one of Hamilton’s biggest mistakes in the play, his affair with Maria Reynolds, is partly portrayed as being a result of exhaustion. In “Say No to This,” Hamilton explains, “I hadn’t slept in a week, I was weak, I was awake, You’d never seen a bastard orphan more in need of a break” (Miranda). Thus, the portrayal of Hamilton’s approach to labor is mixed: his work ethic is praised, but the extremes of it are not. He serves as both an example and a cautionary tale.

Another function of Hamilton’s hard work in the musical is to lay the foundations for a narrative that is commonly associated with the American Dream: the bootstraps narrative. Originally made popular by Horatio Alger’s late-nineteenth-century rags-to-riches novels, the bootstraps narrative is the commonly-held idea that if a person works hard enough, they will be able to single-handedly elevate their socioeconomic status. In Alger’s books, the protagonists usually consist of boys who work hard in order to raise their class status (Rooks). Alger “reemphasizes the merits of honesty, hard work, and cheerfulness in adversity. He has Mr. Armstrong [a character] announce that he’d begun as a poor boy, barefoot and in overalls; far from harming him, poverty has made him ‘industrious and self-reliant’” (Bode XIX). The figure of the bootstrapper is synonymous with a go-getter who pursues the American Dream. Miranda’s portrayal of Hamilton’s elevation from an orphan to a founder of America renders the musical a bootstraps narrative from its very first line.

Like many historical adaptations that exaggerate particular circumstances for entertainment purposes, *Hamilton* adheres to historical evidence when it comes to Hamilton’s origins, but still changes that history to suit the needs of the bootstraps narrative that Miranda constructs. Miranda repeatedly, freely admits to these changes in *Hamilton: The Revolution*. Within this book, Miranda utilizes footnotes to point out moments in the lyrics where he uses inaccurate information to further his narrative. As he puts it: “‘History is entirely created by the person who tells the story’” (Miranda and McCarter 33).

One innocuous example of Miranda’s alteration of history in the service of the bootstraps narrative is the portrayal of Hamilton’s mother in the musical. In Chernow’s seven hundred and thirty-one page biography, which the musical is based on, Chernow states that Hamilton’s mother, Rachel was not a prostitute. In fact, he asserts that “such insinuations are absurd” (11). As a result, the moniker “son of a whore” in the musical becomes questionable (Miranda). However, Miranda’s change serves a unique purpose: in this case, being the son of a

prostitute furthers Hamilton's characterization as someone who came up from the bottom. So, in addition to being a bastard and an orphan, he has to be rendered as the child of someone of ill repute.

Hamilton's eventual status as a "hero and a scholar" in the musical--which immediately follows the aforementioned characterization of a "bastard, orphan, son of a whore"--confirms that Hamilton will not only make something of himself in the course of the musical, but that he will become a champion, and an intelligent one at that (Miranda). Thus, the early musical numbers "Alexander Hamilton" and "My Shot" serve to emphasize one of the main ideas of bootstrapping: when you achieve greatness, it is on your own merits. These merits, as emphasized by Chernow and Miranda, are intelligence, ambition, and a large capacity for hard work. All of these characteristics aid Hamilton in his pursuit of the American Dream. Before the phrase "American Dream" even existed, Hamilton was chasing it.

Another crucial part of the American Dream that the American promise keeps is rugged individualism. In *Hamilton* this ideal is illustrated through musical Hamilton's independence. Key people who helped the real Hamilton on his journey to America and eventual success are omitted from the soundtrack. One of these characters is Hugh Knox, a pastor who "discovered" Hamilton and "open[ed] his library...encouraged him to write verse, and prodded him toward scholarship" (Chernow 35). It was Knox who persuaded Hamilton to publish a poem on the fateful hurricane. That poem got Hamilton out of St. Croix. There is also Ann Lytton Venton, Hamilton's older cousin on his mother's side. Not only did she give him more experience in financial affairs by giving him power of attorney over her father's estate, but she was also "quite likely the *principal* benefactor...of his voyage to North America and subsequent education" (Chernow 39, emphasis mine). Venton's financial support may have been a main factor in Hamilton's survival in America, but she does not garner a single mention in the musical's songs, her role summed up in the lines, "Well the word got around, they said 'This kid is insane man,' Took up a collection just to send him to the mainland" (Miranda).

Furthermore, the connections that Hamilton made while at King's College, including a circle of friends who increased his prominence and influence within high society circles, are also omitted from *Hamilton*. One of these people include Elias Boudinot, who "exposed [Hamilton] to a refined world of books, political debate, and high culture" (Chernow 45). The musical implies that Hamilton naturally came across his ability to navigate the political sphere and make friends in high places as soon as he left Nevis. For instance: Hamilton's introduction to the likes of John Lafayette, a French aristocrat, is staged as happening on accident and in a bar rather than through a formal introduction. Hamilton does not have to wait for people to connect him with key figures; instead, he attracts them all on

his own. The musical paints Lafayette and others as immediately impressed with Hamilton: “Ooh who is this kid? What’s he gonna do?” (Miranda).

Rugged individualism is further promoted during “Hurricane,” a reflective song that Hamilton sings as he ponders what to do about his affair with Maria Reynolds. Hamilton briefly gives credit to the people who funded his trip from St. Croix to America, reminiscing,

I looked up and the town had its eyes on me
They passed a plate around
Total strangers
Moved to kindness by my story
Raised enough for me to book passage on a
Ship that was New York bound. (Miranda)

This acknowledgement is delivered in awed, grateful tones that are a rarity in the musical. It is one of the only times that Hamilton admits to someone doing something for him, and the moment does not last long. Those tones are quickly dismissed and replaced by Hamilton’s usual, confident self as he gives himself a pep talk:

I wrote my way out of hell
I wrote my way to revolution
I was louder than the crack in the bell
I wrote Eliza love letters until she fell
I wrote about The Constitution and defended it well
And in the face of ignorance and resistance
I wrote financial systems into existence
And when my prayers to God were met with indifference
I picked up a pen, I wrote my own deliverance. (Miranda)

The anaphora of “I” is prevalent in this song as well as others in the musical. These songs, such as “Alexander Hamilton,” “My Shot,” and “Nonstop,” feature Hamilton repeatedly establishing himself as a success based on his own merit. He proclaims, “I wrote my own deliverance,” privileging his own writing skills over any sense of divine intervention or communal assistance (Miranda).

Thus, rather than help from other people, Hamilton’s intelligence, ambition, and hard work are hailed as the two forces that propel him to better circumstances. Hamilton springs fully formed and developed, as if he has come by his skills entirely on his own. And while there are some limits to what Miranda could do while changing a 700-plus-page biography into a Broadway musical, the omission of specific people who helped Hamilton become a success confirms the image of the founding father as a rugged individual, a “self-starter” (Miranda). During “My Shot,” he tells his audience, “I’m a diamond in the rough, a shiny piece of coal, Tryin’ to reach my goal. My power of speech: unimpeachable,” and

confidently asserts that “Eventually, you’ll see my ascendancy” (Miranda). He is a go-getter--an embodiment of the entrepreneurial spirit.

Despite the commonalities between the American Dream and the American promise, there are certain differences. Firstly, the American promise is not something that an individual can achieve. Instead, it is an aspiration that America has to fulfill. Here, the double meaning of promise comes into play: a promise is both the assurance something will happen and the potential for greatness. Thus, as a reimagining of the American Dream, the American promise is the belief that a true meritocracy will someday happen. It is also a presentation of America’s potential to become great if that meritocracy happens. Michel Martin summarizes this idea in a review of the musical: “Hamilton's story reminds us of our nation's promise, even as that promise continues to elude many, that America is meant to be a place where the out-of-wedlock son of a panelist, friendless single mother, cleaning up the play's opening lines, of course, can rise up with hard work, brains and courage.” In *Hamilton*, the promise is not simply a rosy image of America or a success for an individual to strive for: it is a challenge to the country to meet the expectations of the American Dream.

Secondly, unlike the American Dream, the American promise does not emphasize the financial aspect of achieving success. While Hamilton certainly laments his lack of money in “That Would Be Enough,” and is referred to as “penniless” by Angelica in “Satisfied,” there is something that he privileges over everything else in the musical: his legacy (Miranda). Legacy is mentioned in “Wait for it,” “The Room Where it Happens,” and “Blow Us All Away.” His legacy is discussed, threatened, and defended. The most important utilization of legacy, however, is in “The World was Wide Enough.” In this penultimate song, Hamilton breaks into verse as the fateful bullet that will end his life is coming toward him: “What if this bullet is my legacy? Legacy. What is a legacy? It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see. I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me” (Miranda). The musical asks its audiences to consider the legacy that they will leave behind when they die. As a character, Hamilton argues that a legacy does not just affect the individual: he suggests that it should benefit society as a whole. In contrast to the American promise privileges what the individual can achieve for the good of society rather than himself. To this end, using Alexander Hamilton and his multiple achievements sends a message to audiences: consider your life and your legacy (McGregor).

In order to leave a legacy behind though, people first have to have opportunity. The American promise seeks to expand this opportunity to minorities and immigrants living in America. In *Hamilton*, this argument for opportunity for people from all walks of life is staged by expanding the definition of American identity and what it means to be a part of America. Miranda plots this expansion

through the casting choices that are made in *Hamilton*. Chris Jackson, who plays Washington, is a bald, strapping black man; Eliza Schuyler is portrayed by Phillipa Soo, who has a Chinese-American father; and Hamilton himself is played by Miranda, the son of Puerto Rican immigrants and the descendant of a slave. By putting people of color into the clothing and habits of the country's founders, Miranda seeks to put minorities into the narrative.

Before the American Promise: The Black and Immigrant Approach

To understand why it is important for Miranda to try and tackle the issue of the American Dream as it relates to minorities, one must understand that he is not the first to try. For example, there is James Baldwin, who used the American Dream to frame the issue of injustice against people of color. On March 7, 1965, on the same day as Bloody Sunday, Baldwin participated in a televised debate at Cambridge University about the American Dream: specifically, whether it was “at the expense of the American Negro” (New York Times). During his conclusion, Baldwin argues that

One of things the white world does not know, but I think I know, is that black people are just like everybody else. We are also mercenaries, dictators, murderers, liars. We are human, too. Unless we can establish some kind of dialogue between those people who enjoy the American dream and those people who have not achieved it, we will be in terrible trouble...Until the moment comes when we, the Americans, are able to accept the fact that my ancestors are both black and white, that on that continent we are trying to forge a new identity, that we need each other, that I am not a ward of America, I am not an object of missionary charity, I am one of the people who built the country--until this moment comes there is scarcely any hope for the American dream. If the people are denied participation in it, by their very presence they will wreck it. And if that happens it is a very grave moment for the West. (Baldwin)

What Baldwin points out here is the hypocrisy of having an American Dream that excludes certain groups of Americans because of racism and prejudice. With his assertion that “black people are just like everybody else,” he is also pointing to the tendency to Other minorities within our national identity (Baldwin). By arguing that black people are also “mercenaries, dictators, murderers, liars,” Baldwin further humanizes them, moving them away from being perceived as causes or victims of subordination; instead, they are people who have participated in building the country. They are Americans.

In *Hamilton*, Miranda's presentation of Hamilton as a multicultural immigrant makes his mission similar to Baldwin's. Miranda's strides to "tell the story of the first American immigrant and the formation of our country" show how he wants to tie immigration to the American narrative (qtd. in PBS). In order to do so, not only does he uncover Hamilton's story, but he uses Hamilton as an example of a successful American immigrant who was allowed to develop his gifts and benefit the country.

Baldwin and Miranda also intersect when it comes to their views on America's treatment of its founders. Baldwin writes that "what passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors" when, in reality, "they were hungry, they were poor, they were convicts. That's how the country was settled. Not by Gary Cooper" (Baldwin). In an interview with the *Atlantic*, Miranda shared similar sentiments. He states that *Hamilton* is

A particularly nice reminder at this point in our politics...when immigrant is used as a dirty word by politicians to get cheap political points, that three of the biggest heroes of our revolutionary war for independence were a Scotsman from the West Indies, named Alexander Hamilton; a Frenchman, named Lafayette; and a gay German, named Friedrich von Steuben, who organized our army and taught us how to do drills.

(qtd. in Delman)

Both seem to recognize that an important tool for the creation of inclusivity is using the founder narratives that America prides itself on. For Baldwin and Miranda, the narrative of white, American excellence perpetuates a notion that excludes those who originally helped establish this country.

However, both Miranda and Baldwin acknowledge the American Dream as a real factor in our society. They use this factor in order to advocate for their communities. Both of them demand that America live up to the opportunities that it says it provides. If the American Dream is real, they argue, it should be open to everyone. Ta-Nehisi Coates, on the other hand, seems to propose a rejection of the American Dream entirely. In his book *Between the World and Me*, which was written in the vein of Baldwin's "A Letter to My Nephew," Coates asserts that the Dream is too fraught for him to accept:

I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I

was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you. (Coates 11)

Unlike Baldwin, who wants to claim the Dream for black people *because* it was built on their backs, Coates refuses it for precisely that reason. This concern with the human cost of the Dream aligns with Coates' emphasis on bodily autonomy in his writings. In a society where police brutality and mass incarceration are everyday realities, he argues that black people *pointedly* do not have that autonomy. Thus, for Coates, the Dream is too fraught with the subjugation of others for him to comfortably settle into the ideology. Because "the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies," he cannot inhabit it (Coates 11). Here, Miranda's reimagining of the American Dream as the American promise is futile, because that promise is built on blood.

Baldwin may share some similarities with Miranda's ideals about the role of minorities in the American Dream, but he also reflects some of the concerns that Coates has. In his 1963 speech "A Talk to Teachers," Baldwin tells his audience, "Every street boy...looking at the society which has produced him...understand[s] that this structure is operated for someone else's benefit – not for his." Furthermore, Baldwin claims, "if I were a teacher in this school, or any Negro school...I would try to make each child know that these things are the result of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him"--which also ties back to the destruction of bodies in *Between the World and Me*. The themes in "A Talk to Teachers" parallel Coates' writings about the American Dream, institutional racism, and privilege. At the same time though, like Miranda, Baldwin still wants to claim America for these children. In that same speech, Baldwin says that he "would try to make him know that just as American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it...and that it belongs to him" (Baldwin). The idea that America "belongs to" these students seems to move toward Miranda's project of expanding who can be a part of America's story (Baldwin, Delman).

While the American Dream has certainly shut minorities out, rap artists have still managed to co-opt the ideology and create their own vision of the Dream. Rap music's conceptualization of the American Dream has the tendency to emphasize a protagonist who not only achieves success, but achieves it in *excess*. As if to compensate for the opportunities that were denied to them due to institutional racism, poverty, and other factors, African-American rappers are known for showcasing the wealth that they have. Once their circumstances are bettered, rappers use conspicuous consumption in order to show how far they have come.

While many people are critical of this consumption and its negative effects on its audience, Rehn and Skold argue that such monetary displays are yet another way that rap is subversive. They contend that a "number of rap classics read like

manuals for the entrepreneurial youngster” (Rehn and Skold 19). Whether conspicuous consumption is good or bad, it shows how the financial aspect of the American Dream is perpetuated through multiple mediums. In this case, rap and hip hop, which are forms of music that emerged from disenfranchised communities, display what happens when success in the American Dream is taken to extremes. From this tradition arises Biggie Smalls’s “Get Money,” Lil Wayne’s “Money On My Mind,” and Kendrick Lamar’s “Money Trees.”

The rap genre is packed with songs about getting money: Rehn and Skold assert that

Since rap music’s first major break in 1979, with Sugar Hill Gang’s hit “Rappers Delight,” which brought about an interest in the music by the mainstream music industry...the entertainment industry, especially throughout the late 20th century, has been an option of hope for “upward” mobility for African-Americans—the storytelling has often focused on money, on how one is going to get some of that “precious green.” (Rehn and Skold 19)

In this case, achieving the rap American Dream goes beyond having a white picket fence; it means having as many white picket fences as you can. Not only do rappers have something to prove to other artists who may try and underestimate them, but they have something to prove to society.

If the American Dream is supposed to be about using your gifts to rise out of your circumstances and into a better financial situation, there are none who vocally reflect this more than rappers. Ice Cube, Jay Z, Dr. Dre, Eazy E—all of these names are associated with an atmospheric rise from the streets to the Hollywood Hills. Like Rehn and Skold, Ben Westhoff asserts that “For many kids hip-hop represented a *way out*, a constructive way to make a living” (15, emphasis mine). Although it is not apparent at first, it makes sense that Miranda, as a hip-hop buff, would see a gangsta narrative in Hamilton’s life. Hamilton’s early life practically mirrors that of early rap and hip-hop artists. His writing enables him to find people who are willing to give him a way out of Nevis.

While Miranda’s version of Hamilton does not participate in conspicuous consumption, there are other key elements to his character that are highlighted in order to make him a figure that fits within rap culture. In an interview with Lawrence Toppman of the *Charlotte Observer*, Miranda explains that he found Alexander Hamilton’s story to be gangsta when he read the biography by Chernow. He asserts that “[Hamilton’s] childhood out-Dickenses Dickens...he literally wrote his way out of his circumstances, which is the same story as a hip-hop artist’s. The building blocks he laid down helped define the country, but he got shot by the vice-president in New Jersey – and it doesn’t get any more gangster than that!” (Toppman).

The rapper that both Chernow and Miranda's Hamilton has the greatest parallel with is Tupac. Born Lesane Parish Crooks, Tupac was born to a falsely imprisoned Black Panther mother and an absent father (Westhoff 292). While absent fathers are not necessarily uncommon, they are common in the rap and hip hop songs. These songs double as a form of social commentary that points out the effects of a lack of a male figure in the household. Though this discourse has the potential to conform to stereotypes about the black community, the conversation about black fathers is still relevant. When Hamilton raps to Eliza "my father left," it harkens back to the same tradition that Tupac participates in during "Papa'z Song," LL Cool J details in "Father," and other rappers use to talk about their fatherless past (Miranda).

Tupac and Hamilton also have parallels when it comes to the way that they express their genius. Like Hamilton, Tupac was a frenetic writer. According to Westhoff, Tupac "forever churned with ideas and spoke with great intensity on whatever subject" (291). He also "impatiently recorded his songs immediately after writing them" (Westhoff 291). While Hamilton had his political writings and anonymous arguments to express his views, Tupac

brought to life the experience of being desperate, black, and poor...He was as passionate and vulnerable as he was provincial and vindictive. Tupac rapped about fighting back, extending the ethos of Ice-T and N.W.A. But he was even brasher. He battled with cops who did him dirty. Drawing more bad press than nearly anyone on this side of O.J. Simpson, he came out on top through charisma and brutal honesty. (Westhoff 291)

Although Hamilton rarely wrote about his own personal experiences of being "desperate...and poor," he did draw from them in order to inspire his work (Westhoff 291). His writings were often argumentative, especially when his policies were controversial. He also battled the press and political enemies publicly, often saying the wrong thing because it was his honest opinion. Like Tupac, who "came out on top through charisma and brutal honesty," the historical Hamilton did not have the same political finesse as Burr or Jefferson but still managed to charm the public. For a brief period of time, through the sheer force of his wit and prominence, Chernow's Hamilton was untouchable.

Furthermore, the environment that Chernow's Hamilton was raised in echoes descriptions of the rough areas that some rappers and hip hop artists grew up in. In Hamilton's biography, Chernow describes Nevis as a grisly place. He details various forms of violence, from the "swarms of marauding pirates and privateers" that entered the city, to the commonly-seen "cutthroats [who] came ashore for duels, resorting to conventional pistols or slashing one another with heavy cutlasses" (Chernow 18-19). He further asserts that "island life contained enough bloodcurdling scenes to darken Hamilton's vision for life, instilling an

ineradicable pessimism about human nature that infused all of his writing” (Chernow 19). Surrounded by the violence and depravity, Hamilton’s circumstances echo that of rap artists from Compton, New York, and other areas with inner city violence. In other words, Hamilton grew up in the hood.

Even when finally he did move past hustling, there are some elements of Hamilton’s hood upbringing that stuck with him. Again, on Nevis, blood and duels were a common element that Hamilton would have been familiar with. In Miranda’s gangsta portrayal of Hamilton, these duels become another trait that echoes hip hop and rap culture. Hamilton’s tendency to get into scrapes with others is comparable to the diss tracks and fights that rap artists often find themselves entangled with. Throughout his life, Hamilton frequently got into “beefs” with political and personal figures (423). In addition to the Tupac-Biggie-like feud between Hamilton and Burr, Hamilton nearly got into a duel with Aedanus Burke after Hamilton badmouthed the southern militia during a 1789 speech; he also clashed with John F. Mercer over his reputation and came extremely close to a duel with Commodore Nicholson (Chernow 308-309, 423, 491). Overall, his history reflects old saying, “Talk shit, get hit.” Chernow asserts that “When it came to aspersions against his honor, Hamilton always had a hair-trigger temper” (423). He took matters of honor into his own hands, to the point where he named an executor of state in case he died during one of his duels.

Hamilton’s hard work, combined with the rough environment that he was raised in, characterizes his toils as “hustle,” which is a main facet of the gangsta persona. And although he was not pushing drugs like Jay Z, Biggie Smalls, and Eazy E, Hamilton did participate in dealing something: in this case, “every conceivable commodity required by planters” (Chernow 29). At the tender age of thirteen, Hamilton was a clerk with Beekman and Cruger, which trained him in the art of clerkship that later opened him up to his position as Treasury Secretary. Despite the fact that he was not dealing crack, Hamilton’s position was not necessarily secure: “While his peers squandered their time on frivolities, Hamilton led a much more strenuous, urgent life that was to liberate him from St. Croix” (Chernow 30). As a child laborer, Hamilton took on a lot of responsibilities in this fast paced, occasionally illegal business. His work was conducted with the goal of rising up in life. Yet, he was still stuck. His plight is expressed accurately by N.W.A: “Takin from motherfuckers cause nobody ain't givin.”

In Hamilton’s case, he does this “takin” through his art. Like many of the great gangsta figures, he “wrote his way out” of his circumstances (Miranda). From Ice-T, who wrote “‘Crip rhymes,’ tales of intimidation and triumph performed aloud in front of friends like poems, rather than being set to music,” to Nas, who wanted to tell his story through rap and became famous for it, multiple hip hop and rap artists have elevated their social position through their words

(Westhoff 47). “Wrote My Way Out,” a song that is featured on the *Hamilton Mixtape*, is an example of hip hop being portrayed as an “option of hope for ‘upward’ mobility for African Americans” (Rehn and Skold 19). As a remix of “Hurricane,” “Wrote My Way Out” features Nas, Dave East, Aloe Blacc, and Miranda. Nas, whom Miranda has cited for the being an inspiration for *Hamilton*, raps, “I picked up the pen like Hamilton” (Miranda). Toward the end, the chorus repeats, “I wrote my way out of the projects” (Miranda). Thus, along with rap, writing and performance became a viable way to better their circumstances.

Despite the fact that they managed to write themselves out of their low origins, there is something that neither Hamilton nor the rappers that he is associated with can escape: the constant spectre of death. Historically, this specter follows Hamilton in the form of familial loss, war, and even the Black Plague. Chernow says that “the delirious Alexander was probably writhing inches from his mother when she expired,” and by the time Alexander was fourteen his “cousin and supposed protector had committed bloody suicide, and [his] aunt, uncle, and grandmother had all died” (24, 26). Combined with the environment of revolution in “My Shot,” where Hamilton raps, “I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory,” it is clear that Hamilton is very aware of his own mortality (Miranda). He also discusses this theme in “Hurricane,” where he repeats, “I couldn’t seem to die” (Miranda).

Likewise, the discussion of mortality is extremely prevalent in rap music--especially early rap music, which spoke to the social realities of living young, black, and in the hood. While Hamilton and his buddies sing about joining the cause despite the threat of death, groups like N.W.A. speak on police violence, institutional racism, and living despite the expectation that they will either be dead or incarcerated. In his article “If God Got Us: Kendrick Lamar, Paul Tillich, and the Advent of Existentialist Hip Hop,” James D. McLeod Jr. describes how “Like many famous hip-hop artists returning home, [Kendrick] Lamar [a rapper] is aware fame does not protect him from bullets that fly in the midst of gang violence. There is a tension between his love for his friends and family and his fear of being surrounded by violence” (124, 128). This tension between life and death is not merely physical; it is manifested through systematic racism and forces that would keep him in obscurity and consequently silence him.

In order to combat this silence, both Hamilton and rap artists use language and art to tell their stories. Thus, writing becomes not only a way out of their dangerous surroundings, but also a way out of insignificance. Perhaps it is this insignificance that Hamilton feared as a boy when he writes that he “would willingly risk [his] life, tho’ not [his] character, to exhalt [his] station” (Chernow 31). Writing offered a way for Hamilton to create a name for himself, even when he did it anonymously. Nas and other hip hop artists followed this same pattern. The difference between them is that while these rappers became known for their

writings in the modern consciousness, Hamilton's story was not prominent until Miranda wrote a musical about it.

Miranda did not just write a musical: he wrote a musical that specifically uses rap and hip hop as its main genres of choice. As a fast-paced form of vocal delivery, rap suited Miranda's needs when it came to writing and performing the songs. It was a structurally useful medium that conveyed all of the information that he wanted to pack into the songs. *Hamilton* is not the first Broadway musical to use rap as a structural addition either: "Rock Island" is rapped in *The Music Man*; the witch from in *Into the Woods* raps her story; and during "Today 4 U," Angel, a character in *Rent*, raps about her success after killing an annoying dog. Miranda also uses rap in his earlier musical, *In the Heights*.

Still, rap is not just a tool that can be used to further the plot of a musical more quickly. As stated before, rap and hip hop are genres of music that were formed by the oppressed and turned into a way to speak on their struggles. In fact, hip hop was created by an immigrant. Born in Jamaica, DJ Kool Herc worked a turntable at a 1973 birthday party in a way that was unheard of. With his skill, he managed to "use the two turntables in a typical DJ setup not as a way to make a smooth transition between two records, but as a way to switch back and forth repeatedly between two copies of the same record, extending the short drum break that the crowd most wanted to hear" (History). This extension led to the creation of break dancing and laid the foundations for rap, which was later innovated and popularized by the likes of Ice T, the Sugarhill Gang, and other early rappers.

Once rap became popular in communities outside of the African-American sphere, it was a major platform to speak on social injustices and black realities. These origins have created a divide in modern rap music. Some rap artists have moved on from the traditions of political rap and moved more so toward emphasizing "the come up," or the financial aspect of their achieving the American Dream. Other rappers, such as Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole, are recognized for their socially conscious and often political music. Lamar was even given a Pulitzer Prize for his work and the musical way that it puts a spotlight on his social realities. But even these rappers "seem to be shying away from offering commentary, or doing so with much more reserve and subtlety than N.W.A." and other early rappers did (Green). Nevertheless, rap music has not only been "historically...one of the ways for black Americans to see a reflection of their lives in mainstream art," but also a way for them to "fight for a cause" (Green). Although that fight is not as prevalent as it used to be due to modern American music trends that demand subtlety in exchange for success, other countries and races have taken up the rap genre and continued to use it to protest for their rights.

When Miranda chose rap and hip hop as the main genre of his songs in *Hamilton*, he actively decided to reference the associations and traditions of the genres. A major factor in the popularity of the musical is its use of hip hop. In

fact, Oskar Eustis, a prominent figure in the musical theater community, argues that

what Lin is doing is taking the vernacular of the streets and elevating it to verse. That is what hip-hop is, and that is what iambic pentameter was. Lin is telling the story of the founding of his country in such a way as to make everyone present feel they have a stake in their country. In heightened verse form, Shakespeare told England's national story to the audience at the Globe, and helped make England England—helped give it its self-consciousness. That is exactly what Lin is doing with *Hamilton*. By telling the story of the founding of the country through the eyes of a bastard, immigrant orphan, told entirely by people of color, he is saying,

“This is our country. We get to lay claim to it.” (qtd. in Mead)

Here, Eustis makes three points: one, that Miranda's use of hip hop and rap in *Hamilton* parallels Shakespeare's writing, which depicted common people's language in verse. It must be noted that Miranda's “common people” are apparently black people and immigrants.² In this vein of thought, Eustis's second point is that “everyone present” are immigrants and black people who may not “feel they have a stake in their country” (qtd. in Mead). Finally, his third point: that Miranda is attempting to do what early rap and hip hop artists did. Not only is he telling the story of a previously obscure immigrant founding father, but he is sending a message specifically to minorities: “he is saying, This is our country. We get to lay claim to it” (qtd. in Mead). By using rap, Miranda is able to build on a black discourse that already has a history of using music to offer social commentary.

Although my emphasis has mainly been on black thinkers and the role of the American Dream in black communities, these arguments about inclusion and America being built on multicultural foundations can easily be applied to arguments about immigration. In fact, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison suggests that the American Dream is really the immigrant dream, “a future of freedom, a kind of human dignity believed unprecedented in the world” (33). For evidence, she reaches back to the founding of America and argues that the American Dream was an idea born from the immigrants who came from the oppressions of the Old World. Like Woods, she argues, the “clean slate” of the New World made the possibility of “a future of freedom” imaginable (Morrison 34). Still, Morrison is also careful not to over-romanticize the immigrant American Dream. Though this ideal existed, she makes

² Miranda's use of “yo,” “brotha,” and other black slang are examples of that language. When countering this, Ishmael Reed describes this usage as the enemy using “slave's language.”

it clear that this immigrant Dream was still one that was fraught with haunting, conflict, and fright (Morrison 35).

In contrast, Samuel offers a different perspective on the immigrant American Dream. Samuel claims that Louis Adamic's 1940 book, *From Many Lands*, shows that the Dream "was not so much about the ability to support oneself and one's family, achieving success, or even enjoying freedom but that, in Woods' words, 'they made their contribution and it was accepted'" (Samuel 29). Louis Adamic was a Slovenia-born immigrant worked his way up and who wrote about first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants and their lives in America (Barratt). As a spokesperson for cultural pluralism during the 1940s and beyond, Adamic's perspective on the American Dream is one that fights for acceptance without assimilation for immigrants. Thus, while rap artists portray the achievement of the American Dream through conspicuous consumption, immigrants, in Adamic's view, have a more humble and good-for-the-community approach.

In terms of the American promise as it relates to the characterization of immigrants in *Hamilton*, all of the major immigrants in the musical--Hamilton, Lafayette, and less-known, Mulligan--are positive examples of the potential of the American promise. Hamilton is a clear success. Lafayette has an accent, raps in French, and embraces his status as a foreigner who is making his contribution to America. In "Guns and Ships," he is introduced as "an immigrant you know and love who's unafraid to step in!" and "America's favorite fighting Frenchman" (Miranda). His "tactical brilliance," and capabilities in battles are emphasized. It is he who, along with Hamilton, recites one of the most famous lines from the musical during "Yorktown": "Immigrants: we get the job done."

In the musical itself, there are several instances when Hamilton's desire to rise up in life has direct ties to immigration and working for success. During "Aaron Burr, Sir," Hamilton tells Burr, "God, I wish there was a war! Then we could prove that we're worth more than anyone bargained for" (Miranda). Later, Hamilton is an "immigrant decorated war vet" (Miranda). According to Chernow, fighting in a war was one of the easiest ways that Hamilton could elevate his socioeconomic class. Correspondingly, U.S. wars have been fought by immigrants since the conception of the country. In "Immigrants and the U.S. Military: Fighting Side By Side since 1776," Jamie Gilpin traces the history of immigrant participation in the American wars. For example, after 9/11, immigrants could take advantage of George W. Bush's policy that fast-tracked their citizenship if they joined the army. Even before 9/11, foreign-born peoples and minorities have been an integral part of the military (Gilpin). Like Hamilton, immigrants could use military involvement in order to improve their situations and attempt to prove their citizenship via loyalty to their adopted nation.

Similarly, one of the most dominant discourses that is used to protest Donald Trump's decision to end DACA are associated with the usefulness of the labor force that immigrants supply. During "In Defense of DACA Parents," Stephen Mucher begins his article by admonishing his readers to "take a moment to consider every hand that has planted, picked, packed, shipped, prepared, served, and cleaned up after nearly every meal you have consumed, from supermarket to restaurant, throughout your life" (Mucher). And although the article seeks to point out that DACA students have parents who are a part of the labor force and deserve to be in this country too, his article is a part of a trend that places deserving, hardworking immigrants as the people who belong in the country. These articles attempt to push back against the Trump administration's view that immigrants are burdens to the country who "ended up denying jobs 'to hundreds of thousands of Americans'" but they ultimately reveal the perception that immigrants must be doing labor in order to have a right to be a part of America (Valdez, Coleman, Ackbar).

Along with hard work, the theme of achievement is woven into these stories. In 2016, Larissa Martinez admitted in her high school valedictorian speech, "I am one of the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the shadows of the United States" (qtd. in Richmond). Similar stories of academic and monetary success are often brought to light in order to combat negative stereotypes about immigrants, as well as showing that they should have as much access to the American Dream as a natural born citizen. It is no accident that DACA recipients are called DREAMers. By emphasizing Hamilton's immigrant status in conjunction with his service and accomplishments on behalf of America, Miranda turns immigration into an opportunity for the country rather than a burden. He also seeks to identify the immigrant struggle for advancement as something that is distinctly American.

The Founding Fathers and the American Promise

Keeping Miranda's intention to create inclusivity by constructing "a story about America then, told by America now" in mind, the choice to use the founding fathers of America as symbols of inclusivity is an odd one, considering their murky histories with race and immigration (qtd. in Delman). A prime example of the dubious choice of founding fathers to represent the American promise is Thomas Jefferson. Although Jefferson is commonly associated with the American Dream due to his egalitarian values and the "all men are created equal" section of the Constitution, the Secretary of State--and later president--was a slave owner and racist who justified his values through pseudoscience (Jefferson). He is the founding father who is quoted as writing that "Blacks 'are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind'" (Magnis 491).

And though Jefferson is not positively represented in *Hamilton*, there are several other founding fathers who probably would not support Miranda's American promise due to prejudice. In *Hamilton*, George Washington's relationship with slavery is summed up into two words in "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)": "Not. Yet" (Miranda). His words are in response to a short query from Laurens about whether the end of the Revolutionary war means freedom for slaves. Historically, Washington's relationship with people of color was much more complicated. According to Philip D. Morgan, he freed over one hundred and sixty slaves; he also "expected his slaves to work unremittingly for him, even in their spare time" (408). The fact that labor is emphasized in the American promise becomes ironic here: Washington's slaves worked and had nothing to show for it until after Washington's death.

Due to the disconnect between the message of inclusivity that *Hamilton* promotes and the founding fathers who are praised in the musical, Washington, the founding fathers, and *Hamilton* are put on trial by writer Ishmael Reed. In 2015 he published "'Hamilton: the Musical.'" Black Actors Dress Up Like Slave Traders...And It's Not Halloween" in reaction to Miranda's creation. During the article, Reed criticizes *Hamilton* and addresses the problematic nature of black men and women dressing up as the founding fathers who owned slaves and in some cases promoted the prolonging of the practice. He unflinchingly throws accusations at each character in the musical that Miranda strives to make relatable. From Angelica Schuyler to Thomas Jefferson, hardly anyone is spared from his criticism. But Reed does not just pointlessly rant: he supports his allegations with primary documents and the works of various historians.

Because Reed's focus is mainly on the founders' relationship to slavery, he does not hone in on a central contradiction of the musical: that *Hamilton*, the multicultural voice of immigrants and minorities in Miranda's retelling, historically had moments when he was pointedly against immigration. One of these moments was after he dealt with the culprits of the Whiskey Rebellion in 1791. While collaborating with Washington on what to do with them, *Hamilton* began to experience "a major shift in his tolerant views on immigrants" (Chernow 476). One of the participants, Findley, reported *Hamilton* as saying that "Gallatin and I were both foreigners and therefore not to be trusted (Chernow 477). Findley responded, "I say for secretary *Hamilton* to object to such a man as a foreigner must be astonishing to those who have any knowledge of his own history" (Chernow 477). While this display could be explained as one that happened out of anger at the culprits--especially Findley, who *Hamilton* believed was slandering him in the papers--there are other instances of *Hamilton*'s anti-immigrant rhetoric. He also supported John Adams' Alien and Sedition Acts because he "now wanted to throttle the flow of immigration" (Chernow 572). Thus, although *Hamilton* once supported immigration, in his later years he turned against the very people

that Miranda is using him to defend. And though Hamilton may have had his own reasons for supporting the acts--be it fear of being looped into the French revolution, as the Jeffersonians were supporting, or the fact that an immigrant was slandering him in the papers--he still spoke out against immigration multiple times in the future, even saying that “the influx of foreigners would ‘change and corrupt the national spirit’” (Chernow 658).

To add to *Hamilton*'s complicated relationship with history, Hamilton himself was not nearly as proud of his immigrant status as he seems in the musical. Two years after his arrival in America, he wrote, “Men are generally too much attached to their native countries to leave it and dissolve all their connexions” (Chernow 40). By 1799, Hamilton had thoroughly practiced what he preached: “Like many self-invented immigrants, Hamilton had totally and irrevocably repudiated his past. He never evinced the slightest desire to revisit the haunts of his early life, and his upbringing remained a taboo topic” (Chernow 580). Thus, while Hamilton is proud of immigrants and how far he has come in the musical, Alexander Hamilton himself historically strove to shake himself of both of those things--to the point where he, a foreigner, was so deluded by his new life that he sought to persecute his fellow immigrants by denying them the opportunities that he had in America.

Of course, there have been attempts to reconcile the founding fathers' tumultuous past and the promise in Hamilton. Some, like Christopher Jackson, who plays Washington in the musical, have attempted to resolve the disconnect by understanding that the founders did both great and terrible things. In an interview at The Bush Center, Jackson says that George Washington was “a brilliant, vital part [of America's founding]...But the man owned people. And he owned people that looked like me” (The Bush Center). He goes on to say that he visited the Washington Monument and came to realize that playing the part of Washington would be to understand that the president “didn't get it all right...and it's a great stain on our legacy” (The Bush Center). Daveed Diggs sums up playing Jefferson up in a few words: “He can have written this incredible document with things that we all believe in. *And he sucks!* Those are both true” (Sullivan). In order to cope with depicting them, both actors try and balance the bad and with the good.

Another major defense of *Hamilton* has consisted of pointing out the strides that the musical takes in regards to representation. Ron Chernow, who served as a consultant during the conception of the musical, expressed disappointment in the criticism of *Hamilton*. He “characterized the debate as ‘sad’ because *Hamilton* ‘is the best advertisement for racial diversity in Broadway history’” (Sullivan). He is not alone in this view of Hamilton being important for representation. Okieriete Onaodowan, who plays both Hercules Mulligan and James Madison, appreciates the fact that he is a “black man playing a wise, smart,

distinguished future president” (McCarter and Miranda 149). Diggs agrees, arguing that “seeing a black man play Jefferson...when he was a kid might have changed his life,” opening his mind to possibilities for what he could do on the stage. Even outside of Broadway, the mission of “a story about America then, told by America now” is regarded as one of the utmost importance (qtd. in Delman). In these arguments, what the musical does for representation now is more important than what happened in the past.

However, while some historians agree that representation matters, they still point out that *Hamilton* distorts the reality of the founding of America. Ken Owen argues that “In the same way that the heroism of the HBO series *John Adams* promotes a certain kind of hero-worship, so *Hamilton* will work against developing a complex, nuanced understanding of the American founding.” When one considers that *Hamilton* is being shown to schoolchildren and used in classes, this assessment of the musical is one that must be investigated.

Reed and Owen are far from the only critics of the show. In spring of 2017, the twenty-first volume of the *Independent Review* published a small anthology of *Hamilton* criticism. The authors of this criticism ranged from economists to historians. Matthew Brown, who organized this collection, says that the success of *Hamilton* has led to such prominent influence that it made him want to “better understand what legacy might emerge from this cultural phenomenon and how it might influence our understanding of the American Founding well into the twenty-first century” (485). In order to do this, he uses historical evidence to describe a “trend of elevating the Founders to the status of American saints and using them to cast judgment on contemporary events and figures”—also known as Founders chic (Brown 486). The collection of criticism that he has curated in this issue of the *Independent Review* reflects a concern with the role of *Hamilton* in this tradition and the impact of it on American society.

However, while there are issues with *Hamilton*’s portrayal of history, there is one thing that the musical does not do: it does not support that America is currently a place where anyone can achieve the American Dream. With close reading, Miranda’s portrayal of America as “A place where even orphan immigrants, Can leave their fingerprints and rise up” becomes an ideal of his rather than a reality. *Hamilton* is a text that believes that the American Dream is real, but also that we have not reached its full potential.

In fact, by today’s terms, Chernow’s *Hamilton* does not achieve the Dream. Throughout his adult life, he is constantly in debt, bailing out and being bailed out by friends. Even though he got his “white picket fence” in the form of the Grange, a country home that *Hamilton* had designed and built with “six rooms upstairs and eight fireplaces to warm the family in the winter,” that same house put his family further into crippling debt (Chernow 642). After he died, *Hamilton*’s family was left with “a debt of between fifty thousand and sixty

thousand dollars hanging over him” (Chernow 724). His marriage to Eliza Schuyler did not make him any richer, as Philip Schuyler was not nearly as rich as rumors suggested and himself died “land rich but cash poor” (Chernow 725). As Chernow put it, for all of his genius and skill, “America’s financial wizard earned comparatively little in his lifetime” (724). In the end, Chernow’s Hamilton’s friends gathered eighty thousand dollars to keep his family afloat. They also “bought [the Grange] for thirty thousand dollars and sold it back to her at half price, ensuring that she could stay there indefinitely,” however, Eliza still had to take out small loans in order to survive (Chernow 725).

By Adams’ definition, Chernow’s Hamilton does not entirely fail at the American Dream though. Hamilton manages to have a “better, deeper, richer life” despite the low social station that he was given at birth. He also manages to “rise in the economic scale,” even with the debt that he was in. In fact, if he had not rejected his compensation for his military service, Hamilton would have been entitled to a pension and land, thus fulfilling the expectation that fighting in the war would put him in a better position. Even with his lack of cash, Hamilton undoubtedly received the part of the American Dream that allows “a chance to develop our capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restrictions of caste or custom” (Samuel 13). Overall, Hamilton is a notable example of an immigrant who is allowed to work hard and achieve his goals in America despite his origins. Not only is an example of a bootstrapper, but he is a figure who works perfectly as symbol of what the American immigrant can achieve--if the American promise is fulfilled.

For those who do not know the history of Hamilton’s final days though, there is also “Immigrants: We Get the Job Done.” A collaboration between K’naan, Snow Tha Product, Riz MC and Residente, rappers whose backgrounds range from Somali Candaian to British Pakistani, “Immigrants” expresses a disillusionment with the American Dream that is not present in *Hamilton*: “Peter Piper claimed he picked them, he just underpaid Pablo. But there ain’t a paper trail when you living in the shadows” (Snow Tha Product). Where the musical is hopeful, “Immigrants We Get the Job Done,” is dark and gritty. The repetition of “Look how far I’ve come” is not only a command for audiences to consider immigrant travel and class elevation, but it mocks America’s idea that we have achieved progress when it comes to equality (K’naan, Snow Tha Product, Riz MC & Residente). It also reveals that Miranda has no scruples with admitting that the American promise has yet to be realized. The song blends samples from the musical with the rappers’ lines in order to present this idea. Specific lines from “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)” involve a discussion between the founding fathers about the American promise:

[Hercules Mulligan]

And just like that it’s over, we tend to our wounded, we count

our dead
[John Laurens]
Black and white soldiers wonder alike if this really means
freedom...
[George Washington]
Not yet. (Miranda)

In his annotation of this moment in “Immigrants: We Get the Job Done,” Miranda makes it clear that America does not have an equal American Dream: “Have we achieved full freedom as a society? Nope. We’ve a ways to go. It was true in 1781 and it’s true now” (Genius). As a musical, *Hamilton* sees potential in America to become a place where today, Hamilton would be able to succeed. In the meantime, through activism, Lin-Manuel Miranda has used the success of the musical to try and push America closer to becoming a reality for the immigrants and minorities in America. In 2016, when newly-elected vice president Mike Pence attended a showing of *Hamilton*, cast member Brandon Victor Dixon broke character to speak directly to him: “We, sir — we — are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights,” he said. “We truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us” (Mele and Healy). This confrontation displays just how much *Hamilton* has stepped off the stage and into the political sphere. It is not just a Broadway show. It is a lightning rod for discussions about race, immigration, and where people fit in America.

At first glance, *Hamilton* is a voice that merely spouts the merits of the American Dream. With a closer look though, *Hamilton* shows that if we want more minorities and immigrants to become successful, we have some work to do. Alexander Hamilton, the historical figure, is characterized in order to portray this message; but if that’s not enough, there is Barack Obama, who serves as a standing example of what happens when the American Promise comes to fruition. The epilogue of *Hamilton: The Revolution* asserts, “It would have blown the powder clear off George Washington’s wig to imagine a half-Kenyan man becoming president” (McCarter and Miranda 284). The description of Obama as a “half-Kenyan man” highlights his Otherness and shows how he succeeded in spite of it—or maybe because of it. In the image that the *Hamilton: The Revolution*’s creators chose, Obama stands, gesturing, under the spotlight onstage. He is brown skinned, dressed in a nice suit and confident as he speaks to the crowd. He is the president of the United States. He believes in unity and progress, regardless of race or background. He will leave a legacy. He is the promise.

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