

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Hamilton's Color-conscious Casting and the
Power of Hip-hop: "A story about America then,
told by America now."

Autor/es

Irene Barreras Mena

Director/es

Prof. Sonia Baelo Allué

Abstract:

The objective of this dissertation is to analyze the Broadway musical *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2016), composed by the Puerto Rican author Lin-Manuel Miranda. This dissertation will analyze the praise and criticism that the musical has received for its “color-conscious” casting, from its analysis as a form of “fanfiction” to its being part of the phenomenon of “Founders Chic”. Nonetheless, this dissertation will defend that the aim of the musical is to represent the diverse population of the United States, along with providing a criticism that applies to both the America of the Revolutionary War and the America of the 21st century. This criticism is mainly achieved through the use of hip-hop as the lingua franca of the musical. Since hip-hop is a non-mainstream genre of music known for its harsh lyrics towards socio-political and economical injustices, it is its combination with the color-conscious casting that really allows for a criticism of the past.

Este ensayo ofrece un análisis del musical de Broadway *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2016), compuesto por el músico puertorriqueño Lin-Manuel Miranda. El principal propósito de este ensayo es analizar los elogios y las críticas que ha recibido el musical tras la elección consciente de un reparto racializado para el musical, desde su análisis como parte del género de “fanfiction”, hasta el haber sido considerado parte del fenómeno “Founders Chic”. Sin embargo, este ensayo defenderá que el propósito del musical es representar a la población diversa que vive en Estado Unidos, así como criticar aspectos que incumben tanto a la América de la Guerra de la Independencia como a la América del siglo XXI. No obstante, esta crítica es posible gracias al uso del hip-hop como lengua vehicular del musical. Ya que el hip-hop es el género de música “no comercial” que se dedica a denunciar situaciones sociopolíticas y económicas injustas, es su combinación con el consciente reparto racializado lo que permite la crítica al pasado.

Key words:

Hamilton, Lin-Manuel Miranda, color-conscious casting, color-blind casting, hip-hop.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Color-blind versus color-conscious casting.....	4
3. <i>Hamilton</i> 's color-conscious casting: raising awareness.....	8
4. <i>Hamilton</i> 's color-conscious casting: depoliticizing history.....	11
5. <i>Hamilton</i> 's glossing over of the issue of slavery.....	14
6. Hip-hop as lingua franca: the political power of rapping.....	17
7. Color-conscious casting in the "Age of Trump".....	21
8. Conclusion.....	25
9. Works Cited.....	27

1. Introduction

Hamilton: An American Musical (2016) was written and composed by the Puerto Rican author, Lin-Manuel Miranda. With a cast of mainly African American and Latino Broadway actors, the musical tells the story of the forgotten Founding Father, Alexander Hamilton who seems to be the embodiment of the American Dream. This dissertation will draw attention to how some critics have condemned the musical arguing that it can be considered as a form of “whitewashing” because the “America then” looks so much like the “America now”, when it did not, glossing over the issue of slavery. However, this dissertation will defend that it is the combination of a racialized casting with the use of hip-hop—a genre of music that nowadays is known for its critical lyrics and the denunciation of unfair situations—that gives back the voice that was stolen to these minorities and allows for the criticism of the past: “American then, told by America now”.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, the writer and composer of the musical, was inspired by Ron Chernow’s biography *Alexander Hamilton* when he read it in 2008. The musical narrates the life of Washington’s Secretary of Treasury (1755-1804) since his orphanhood life in the Caribbean, his migration to New York City with the hopes of having a better life, his marriage to the aristocrat Elizabeth Schuyler, his participation in the War of Independence, his political life, his affair with Maria Reynolds, and finally, his death in the duel against Aaron Burr. At first, Miranda started composing songs for a hip-hop concept album about the Founding Father’s life, *The Hamilton Mixtape*, inspired by the belief that Hamilton was the embodiment of hip-hop (McCarter and Miranda, 10).

As a result, this dissertation is going to focus on how hip-hop—which is directly linked to the issue of race—works as the unifying thread of the musical. After revising the reasons for a racialized casting, this dissertation will contrast them with

how this portrayal of the Founding Fathers has also been considered disrespectful for the people of color and as a depoliticization of history. This means that while the musical criticizes the figures of the Founding Fathers through a racialized casting and the *leitmotif* of “the immigrant coming up from the bottom” (Craft, 432), some other critics agree that *Hamilton* seems to perpetrate a whitewashing of history by reinforcing a mythical idea of the Founding Fathers (Monteiro, 96 and Kajikawa 467). This dissertation will analyze the possible explanations for the glossing over the issue of slavery in the musical. In particular, the inaccurate portrayal of Hamilton as an abolitionist (Umehira, 106), the absence of slave characters (Umehira, 106 and Monteiro, 93) and the reasons for the cutting of *Cabinet Battle #3*, the only song that directly attacked slavery.

At the same time, the dissertation will deal with how diversity is not only present in the musical’s cast but in its music, as seen in the use of hip-hop as a lingua franca, making the Founding Fathers resemble famous rappers. Being hip-hop a non-mainstream genre of music —typical from marginalized communities often used to denounce political, social, and economic injustices— the use of this genre could be perceived as a metaphor for the diversity of voices in the show as well as a claim of national ownership. In other words, through hip-hop the racialized casting is able to feel ownership over a period of time in their country where they were neglected and silenced. Moreover, “America now” is represented through the blending of different genres of music, which, at the same time, defines the different characters in the musical.

2. Color-blind versus color-conscious casting

To fully understand the debates that emerge from *Hamilton* we need to go back to the Golden Age of musicals. According to Corinne Naden, “the 1950s formed the heart of

the Golden Age of American musical theatre” (23). The beginning of this era starts when the curtain when up for *Oklahoma!* (1943), one of the most popular American musicals of all time, whose success was due to “a perfect blend of story, music, and dance, as never before. It was so smoothly done that most audiences did not realize at the time they were watching something different” (Naden, 19). According to Donatella Galella, *Oklahoma!* was one of the first musicals that “went further than typically all-white-cast productions” encouraging “a multiracial reading” (214). The musical aimed for a narrative that celebrated nationhood featuring a “racially diverse ensemble and principals” (Galella, 214). This method of casting is known as “color-blind casting” and it refers “to the director’s freedom to cast any one in any role, regardless of race, and that the audience should be blind to the actor’s racial identity in order to follow the production” (Patterson, 2). Essentially, the idea behind a color-blind casting is that the best actors are cast for specific roles regardless of their race. *Oklahoma!* set an example of racial casting for other musicals. In 1957 *West Side Story* premiered with a score that told the story of two rival teenage gangs in New York City, the American Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks. The musical narrates “the continued influx of immigrants and migrants into the urban core” (Foulkes, 2), while retelling the famous forbidden love story of *Romeo and Juliet*. Tony and Maria—a Jet boy and a Shark girl— fall in love but cannot be together because of the ongoing war between both gangs. As a result, racial tensions become one of the main topics of the plot. During the song “America”, the Sharks denounce the discriminations they face, heavily contrasting the Jet’s song “Gee, Officer Krupke”, where the Americans “carry on about delinquency” (Naden, 27) and how they get away with it. Therefore—unlike in *Oklahoma!*— in *West Side Story* race is an important factor when casting the racialized actors that are going to be a part

of the Sharks and the white Jet actors. This practice is considered “color-conscious”, and it is thought to be “more inclusive, rangier, [and] thoughtful” (Obenreder).

Nonetheless, racial representation in Broadway has historically always been a struggle, leading to the foundation of the Non-Traditional Casting Project. The NTCP was founded in 1986 as a tool to fight for a casting based on the best actor for the role without conforming to stereotypes (Glenn, 8). According to Obenreder, actors of color have experienced “how often the ‘token person of color’ is cast in the role of ‘the other’, made silly or the butt of the joke, or otherwise distanced”. Thus, actors of color are known for being the “side-kicks” of the white protagonist. Lyles Glenn defends that “people of color [...] have to see themselves reflected in plays that mirror their lives if the theater hopes to embrace a wider audience” (15). This is a thought shared by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who composed his first musical —*In The Heights*— because he did not find a leading role available for a Puerto Rican man in “the white sanctuary” of Broadway, besides playing a Shark in *West Side Story*. The musical theatre field had denied a place for people of color ever since the Harlem Renaissance, revealing very little about the lives of people of color in America while only focusing of the “white American psyche” (Arivett, 130). It was not until the Civil Rights Movement came around that cross-cultural casting —or “color-blind casting”— became a priority. Nonetheless, just like in *West Side Story*, race is a factor taken into consideration in *Hamilton*. Thus, its casting is thought to be color-conscious rather than color-blind. This was applauded by President Barack Obama who claimed that the “cast was as diverse as America itself” (Hopkins, 132).

There has been an ongoing debate regarding whether color-blind casting is as forward-looking as it had been previously thought. Lavina Jadhvani believes that this type of casting is nonexistent because in every environment in real life, race always

“factors into relationship dynamics”. Thus, since race is acknowledged, the term used should be “color-conscious casting”. In *The Guardian*, Micha Frazell-Carroll explains that many critics claim that a color-blind casting jeopardizes historical accuracy. In this same article, Diep Tran defends that this practice of casting is dangerous because “it neglects the very real structural hindrances that block actors of colour from the same opportunities as white actors —like low pay in the theatre industry, a lack of roles that are ethnically specific that actors of colour can play, and unconscious bias on the part of white theatres and casting directors”. As a result, Tran, and many other critics, are in favor of color-conscious casting because it “actively acknowledges and considers race when casting ‘non-traditionally’, rather than attempting to ignore it”. In essence, color-conscious casting asks for diversity not only in the casting *per se*, but in the plot or in the message that the story wants to deliver. Nevertheless, there is not a clear-cut distinction between both practices.

In “Hamilton, Obama, and Nationalist Neoliberal Multicultural Inclusion” Galella explains that one of the reasons for *Hamilton*’s success is a “nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion” that appeals to everyone regardless of political ideas. During the Obama era, Galella describes that people of color moved from being in the back to the center of the stage, adopting the roles of white men and “downplaying the salience of race and racism” (3). Miranda’s desire for the main characters to be played by people of color was fully on purpose as a way of eradicating dominance of white roles in the realm of the musical theater. For the writer, the Founding Fathers represented the marginalized “America then”, hence, they had to be played by the marginalized “America now” (Arivett, 133). As a matter of fact, in the play, the only roles portrayed by white actors are the English King George III and the leading loyalist Samuel Seabury. To put it another way, only the British characters or the American

characters who supported the British are played by white actors. As a result of the combination of Obama's presidency and *Hamilton*, the status quo of race was challenged; or in the words of Arivett, "the election of the nation's first Black president, a cultural shift in the minds of American citizens began to be realized, making room for the immigrants of our nation's narrative" (132).

For the most part, *Hamilton's* color-conscious casting has been praised; however, some critics have argued that *Hamilton* may have masked the reality of diversity on Broadway. Mimi Onuoha wrote an article for *Quartz* where she stated that even though the theatre industry fails to "keep data on race and ethnicity of Broadway actors", white actors held 74% of roles in musicals in the 2014-15 season. Furthermore, according to the Asian American performer's Action Coalition, or AAPAC (2), African Americans held 21% of Broadway roles during the 2013-14 season; while Latinx performers only held 8% of Broadway roles after shows like *Hamilton*, *On Your Feet* or *In The Heights*. Before these shows, they only held 2% of the roles. During *Hamilton's* first season in 2015-16, 68% of roles went to white actors; from the 32% left, only 9.6% of the actors of color were cast for roles that had nothing to do with their ethnicity (Hopkins, 136). From these percentages it could be assumed that even though the musical theatre realm has improved a fair amount since the Golden Age of Broadway, much remains to be done in the industry. It is expected that in the future Broadway musicals will follow *Hamilton's* model.

3. *Hamilton's* color-conscious casting: raising awareness

Since *Hamilton* premiered in 2016, people have been wondering about the many possible reasons for its tremendous success. One of the widely praised aspects of the show has been the diverse casting. In the words of Gabbi Shaw, "one of the major

draws of *Hamilton* is its emphasis on diversity, rather than historical accuracy in its casting”. Apparently, there seems to be many different reasons for casting racialized actors.

In “All Hammed Up”, Umehira explains that Miranda’s retelling of Hamilton’s story as an immigrant has the effect of creating a powerful, layered representation of Latinxs. In addition to these positive impacts, *Hamilton*’s color-conscious casting turns the musical into a “powerful political statement that reached beyond Broadway” (107). That is to say, if the musical had favored a historically accurate cast for the roles of the Founding Fathers, it would have been considered controversial rather than innovative since a white casting would have glamourized the image of the Founding Fathers, rather than criticize them. This critique is made by putting at center stage the descendants of the marginalized communities that the Founding Fathers failed to represent before, during and after the American Revolution. In the words of Christopher Jackson, who played George Washington in the Original Broadway Cast, “the Broadway audience doesn’t like to be preached to... By having a multicultural cast, it gives us, as actors of color the chance to provide an additional context just by our presence onstage, filling these characters up” (Jackson in Monteiro, 96). The diversity in the cast helps provide a more historically accurate context when, as it can be seen in Figure 1, the audience sees the performance of “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)”, where black and white soldiers fought together for the independence of their country.



Figure 1: The racialized casting of the musical. Photograph from the original Broadway Production of *Hamilton*, streaming on Disney Plus.

Furthermore, the musical's representation of people of color brings to the surface the idea that these marginalized communities were, and still are, part of America, this being one of the main reasons for its success. This idea is represented in Miranda's quote, "this [*Hamilton*] is a story about America then, told by America now and... our story should look the way our country looks" (In McCarter and Miranda, 10). Thus, this explains that by having a race-conscious casting, the musical gives back the voice that was stolen from people of color throughout history, resulting in a new sense of national pride. Craft explains this phenomenon by saying: "*Hamilton* asserts shared ownership of a national history that has often been excluding of immigrants and people of color" (430). For the first time, Hamilton's story is being told from the point of view of a Latino immigrant who resembles what Hamilton really looked in 1776.

As a matter of fact, the musical has a "pro-immigrant theme" (Craft, 432) attached to Alexander Hamilton's upbringing as a Caribbean "immigrant coming up from the bottom" (Miranda, et al.). In addition, Lafayette's immigration from France to help in the American Revolution is also highlighted when both men high-five each other confidently while saying "Immigrants: We get the job done" (Miranda, et al.) during the Battle of Yorktown. This line raised such thundering ovation from the off-Broadway audience that extra bars had to be added to the song. This response could be interpreted as a sign that the audience understood the context of the quote as also fitting the contemporary political panorama, which goes back to the idea that the musical is providing the representation and voice that immigrants have traditionally lacked in American history and that they are struggling to find at present. This could also be related to Chris Jackson's defense that the Broadway audience dislikes being preached on, but enjoys a multiracial casting that provides additional context to the story.

Lastly, one of the other reasons for a racialized casting according to Chernow—the author of the biography of *Alexander Hamilton*— was that Miranda and the cast aimed to “bring history to a broader audience” (Monteiro, 98), which is linked to the concept of making, not only Broadway, but a retelling of history accessible to as many people as possible. Therefore, as this dissertation has explained before, *Hamilton* was created with the idea that it was going to set an example of color-conscious casting for newer musicals, along with drawing a new public into Broadway shows.

4. *Hamilton*'s color-conscious casting: depoliticizing history

Although the racialized casting has mostly been praised by critics, others describe the color-conscious casting as disrespectful to people of color and as depoliticizing history. Lyra D. Monteiro has been one of the most vocal critiques of *Hamilton*'s multiracial casting advocating that the musical portrays history the same way textbooks do, that the only people who lived—or that mattered— during the American Revolution were the wealthy, slave-owning, white men (94). Monteiro describes the phenomenon of representing the founders as “relatable, cool guys” as the “Founders Chic”. The movement of the “Founders Chic” describes the glorification and glossing over of the colonial elite that played the role of building the beginnings of America. Following this definition, *Hamilton* seems to be the paragon of the “Founders Chic” because its use of history gives the impression of being “more as a comfort blanket than as a serious means to enhance popular understanding of the American Revolution” (Owen). A clear instance of “Founders Chic” in *Hamilton* can be seen in Figure 2 which is Jefferson's entrance in his solo “What'd I Miss”. As a matter of fact, Jefferson is portrayed as this sarcastic character that works as a comic relief in moments of political tensions. While Hamilton tends to be a relatively serious character, Jefferson counterbalances it through

ironic comments or funny faces. This results in the musical reinforcing a mythical idea of the Founding Fathers, which goes back to a white-centric view of history. This form of viewing history has led to the belief that the Founding Fathers were heroic men who never did wrong, when in reality, they were complicit with the issue of slavery, among other forms of racial discriminations.



Figure 2: Daveed Diggs as Jefferson in his solo “What’d I Miss” with the racialized ensemble. Photograph from the original Broadway Production of *Hamilton*, streaming on Disney Plus.

Therefore, the crux of the matter is that stating that *Hamilton* is “a story about America then, told by America now” is quite misleading. Although some critics have argued that this sentence erases people of color from their own country as if they were never there during the Revolutionary War this dissertation points in a different direction. It does not erase people of color because many of the leading actors are black or Latinx; however, it is a misleading sentence because these actors play the role of 18th century leaders rather than the more realistic role of slaves. Monteiro depicts this idea as insulting because it neglects to represent that America “then” already looked like America “now” (93). Thus, having in the stage actors of color playing the roles of white men in the early America, hides the fact that the ancestors of those actors were the ones who were excluded from the freedoms fought by the Founding Fathers. This is the main

reason why a racialized casting telling the story of *Hamilton* has been considered controversial, because it perpetrates the whitewashing of history.

Besides ignoring the existence of slaves during the 18th century, *Hamilton* reinforces the mythical idea of the American Dream, as it is seen in the line:

got a lot farther by working a lot harder,
by being a lot smarter,
by being a self-started” (Miranda, et al.).

This philosophy is controversial in many different ways; however, from the point of view of immigrants, it overlooks the structural inequalities that block them from achieving the American Dream as fast as a white person would (Monteiro, 96). Thus, this is another kind of whitewashing and depoliticizing history.

The depoliticization of history has led Aja Romano to consider the musical as fanfiction. Romano believes that *Hamilton*'s aim is not to be historically precise, but to be a creative adaptation of the Treasury of State's life. Since fanfiction is known for being a metafictional genre that departs from a particular canon to rewrite an already known story, *Hamilton* would fall in this category. As a result, the cultural critic has defended the musical as “a postmodern metatextual piece of fanfic” because it “does not simply celebrate the founding fathers, but argues with American history to reclaim it for ‘dismissed and devalued’” (Romano). One of the most notably known strategies from fanfiction is “racebending” which takes place when the race or ethnicity of a character is changed in order to represent a cultural minority, hence, it creates a new role for an actor from that community. In other words, classifying *Hamilton* as a ‘fanfiction’ reduces the amount of depoliticization that it has. This means that the musical's amount of depoliticization depends on the perspective of its analysis. That is to say, if judged by its historical accuracy, *Hamilton* not only depoliticizes history but also disrespects

people of color for the number of reasons previously mentioned. However, if we consider *Hamilton* as ‘fanfiction’ bearing in mind that it is retelling a story that is already known and reclaiming those aspects of race that have been “diminished and devalued”, the musical is no longer whitewashing American history, but giving it a new sense of pride.

Lastly, another aspect that has been criticized has been *Hamilton*’s apparent popularity with people of color and not only with the typical white Broadway audience. However, accessibility cannot be accomplished if the prices are unaffordable. Monteiro explains that in the season of 2013-14, 80% of all Broadway audience was white (97). One of the possible reasons is that many people of color may be unable to afford a Broadway ticket. Therefore, when advocating for a show that is inclusive, not only in its cast, but in its target audience, tickets should not cost hundreds of dollars. Nonetheless, Miranda created the *Hamilton Education Program*, which schools can enroll in. Selected schools follow a set of guidelines to teach American history and, afterwards, are invited to see the show. This organization counterbalances the high prices of the tickets since every school in the country is able to register for free.

5. *Hamilton*’s glossing over of the issue of slavery:

Along with the depoliticizing allegations against the musical, the glossing over the issue of slavery has been another widely criticized aspect in *Hamilton*. The reality is that, during the more than two-hour-long show, not even once it is mentioned that the Founding Fathers were slaveholders. This inaccurate portrayal goes even further when Alexander Hamilton is depicted as a stalwart abolitionist. Instances of this are seen in songs such as “Cabinet Battle #1”, where Hamilton and Jefferson debate about having the government to assume state’s debts and Hamilton attacks him by saying:

A civics lesson from a slaver, hey neighbor
Your debts are paid 'cause you don't pay for labor
'We plant seeds in the South. We create.' Yeah, keep ranting
We know who's really doing the planting (Miranda, et al.)

Something similar is seen in "Stay Alvie", when John Laurens describes his job during the Revolutionary War:

I stay at work with Hamilton
We write essays against slavery
And every day's a test of our camaraderie
And bravery (Miranda, et al.).

Although it is true that during the Revolutionary years, Laurens and Hamilton worked together to free and enlist black soldiers, these motivations seem to have been replaced with the desperation to enter the upper classes of American society after Lauren's death. Kylie Umehira believes that the reason why Hamilton suddenly forgot about being an abolitionist may have been related to the fact that he married into the slaveholding, aristocrat Schuyler family, "causing him to overlook his own public stance on slavery as to assimilate into the opulent slaveholding world he was so desperate join" (106). According to Chernow, there is no proof of whether Eliza and Alexander Hamilton owned slaves in their household (210); however, from a series of papers written by the Founding Father it can be assumed that they may have owned one or two. Even so, at the end of the musical, it is inferred by Eliza that if Hamilton had not been killed in his duel against Burr, he would have continued working for the abolition of slavery: "I speak out against slavery / You could have done so much more if you only had time" (Miranda, et al.). This verse of the song "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story" appears to be historically accurate, because Eliza Hamilton did speak out against slavery; though, many of her letters have been lost (Thinnes). Nevertheless, what caught the attention of fans when *Hamilton* was released on Disney Plus in July 2020, was that

while Eliza (Philippa Soo) sings that verse George Washington (Chris Jackson) —who is standing behind her— bowed his head symbolizing that he acknowledges his role in perpetuating slavery, as it can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Eliza (Philippa Soo) and Washington (Chris Jackson) in the musical’s closing song. Photograph from the original Broadway Production of *Hamilton*, streaming on Disney Plus.

Additionally, it is true that a close listening to the lyrics of “What’d I Miss” reveals that the song references “Sally”, Jefferson’s slave with whom he had an ongoing sexual relationship. However, it is easy to miss, creating a narrative where slavery either did not exist during the Revolutionary era, or it was not an important issue. Meanwhile, the reality was that “a slave was present in one in five of the city’s white households” (Monteiro, 94). Something similar is seen in the lyrics of “The Room Where It Happens”, where Burr sings that “no one”—not even him—was in the room while Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison discussed secret decisions. Once again, the musical is erasing the presence of the slaves that might have been in the room serving the politicians dinner (Monteiro, 94). The absence of slavery in the musical removes an important part of American history and reinforces the white-centric view of history because it excludes people of color from the historical narrative. Therefore, the idea that America “then” already looked like America “now” removes people of color from their own narrative and the musical perpetrates the idea that they do not have any stories to

tell, suggesting that “there is no place for people of color in America now” (Umehira, 106).

In this sense, it is remarkable that there was going to be a song dealing with the issue of slavery, “Cabinet Battle #3”, where Jefferson and Hamilton were going to debate Benjamin Franklin’s anti-slavery petition of 1789 (Taylor). Unlike in the other two cabinet battles, Jefferson’s defense of slavery made him win. The reasons for the cutting off this song are unclear. Although at first Miranda defended on Twitter that it was due to timing reasons, later on he explained Hamilton’s complicity with slavery,

Hamilton—although he voiced anti-slavery beliefs—remained complicit in the system. And other than calling out Jefferson on his hypocrisy with regards to slavery in Act 2, doesn't really say much else over the course of Act 2. And I think that's actually pretty honest. ... He didn't really do much about it after that. (In Reneau)

Despite the song being in *Hamilton: The Mixtape* (2017), its absence on stage leaves a feeling of erasure. On the other hand, keeping it would have perpetuated the idea of Hamilton as an abolitionist leader when in reality he purchased slaves in his father-in-law’s behalf and invested into the cotton production in Louisiana, which resulted in the sale of thousands of slaves (Kajikawa, 475). Consequently, although a direct attack on slavery would have been necessary for the show to be as diverse as it claims to be, the reality is that in the late 18th century, there was nothing wrong with slavery for the politicians that appear in the musical. Therefore, portraying them as abolitionists would have entailed a depolitization of history in its lack of historical accuracy.

6. Hip-hop as the lingua franca: the political power of rapping

As a result of the importance the musical gives to diversity, variety is not only present in the color-conscious casting but in the music as well. *Hamilton* blends different genres

of music as a metaphor for representing a sample of the different races of people that live in America, and not only that, but “the ongoing struggle to define national identity” (Kajikawa, 468). Although the musical combines different genres of music such as hip-hop, R&B or musical theatre, among others, hip-hop works as a lingua franca. Thus, hip-hop’s aim is to mirror the Founding Fathers —the “America then”— and famous rappers —the “America now”.

Considering that the issue of a color-conscious casting has come under the spotlight of criticism, this dissertation defends that without the use of hip-hop, the musical’s denunciation of the past would have been unachievable. *Hamilton* takes advantage of the political discourse of resistance characteristic of hip-hop lyrics to create tension between the characters without being unappealing to the audience. Furthermore, since the color-conscious casting represents the marginalized communities in America, they do not sing the regular Broadway showtunes —which are normally associated with whiteness and the mainstream— but hip-hop. Therefore, hip hop strengthens the claim of national ownership of people of color because one of the genre’s main objective is to denounce political, social and economic injustices. Consequently, hip-hop is the unifying thread of the musical, tying together the story of the forgotten Founding Father and the racialized casting resulting into “an intervention in the present moment not to preserve the status quo but to support some of the marginalized members of US society” (Kajikawa, 471).

In order to work as a unifying thread, hip-hop plays an important role in the characterization of the main characters. For instance, in the song “Farmer Refuted”, Alexander Hamilton and Samuel Seabury—the leading loyalist of the British Empire—debate about America’s independence. While Hamilton delivers his arguments using fast-speed rap, Seabury provides his counterrevolutionary ideas through a melody

that resonates a “Bach-like” waltz (Kajikawa, 469). This is further seen in the fact that King George III is one of the few characters who does not rap; in fact, his songs sound similar to 60s pop tunes. Besides him and Seabury, there is only another American character whose rapping is not as fast versed as the rest, this character is Eliza Schuyler-Hamilton. The first time the audience gets to know Eliza is when she sings “Schuyler Sisters” with Angelica and Peggy. Although the three of them rap in the song, this scene is known more for its R&B melody than for its rapping. Nonetheless, when Eliza narrates how she met Hamilton in her solo song “Helpless”, there is a glimpse of her rapping skills. However, they are overshadowed in the following song, “Satisfied”, when her sister Angelica tells the same story but from her point of view, rapping the second fastest song in the musical. There have been different hypothesis regarding why Eliza is one of the few characters who does not seem to rap as much as other characters, relying more on other musical genres. Although the reason is unknown, it may be because Eliza is simply not in a rush to tell her story. In Chernow’s biography *Alexander Hamilton*, he explains that Elizabeth Schuyler died at the age of ninety-seven which contrasts with her husband, who died fifty years earlier. Therefore, Eliza’s lack of rapping rather than being a metaphor of race, is a metaphor of time. Contrarily to her contemporary characters who died young, Eliza had all the time she wanted to tell her story. Hence, she did not need the fast rapping verses and could rely more on musical genres such as R&B and classical musical theatre. On top of that, when going back to the idea of characterization, Eliza is presented as a sweet, compassionate woman. This description clashes with hip-hop’s harsh lyrics, resulting in the use of R&B and classical theatre songs as part of her characterization.

Along with Eliza, all the Revolutionary character seem to have a different genre of music attached to their characterization, while still managing to rap. In the case of

Washington, gospel choruses always seem to follow him, which is seen in “History Has Its Eyes on You” or in “One Last Time”; Jefferson’s blues appear not only in his solo “What’d I Miss”, but follows him throughout group songs such as “Washington On Your Side” or “We Know”. Moreover, Burr’s songs rely on Jamaica’s dancehall rhythms. Thus, all of these characters sing slightly differently while still managing to rap, having the effect that *Hamilton* is reclaiming national ownership by presenting a new form of identity that is characterized with different musical genres. Nonetheless, in the case of the protagonist himself, Hamilton is characterized by his long and fast-rapping verses with multi-word rhymes, evoking rappers such as Big Pun or Rakim. The reason behind this may be to prove that the Founding Father was above everyone else in the room intellectually speaking, which is something that is constantly implied throughout the show, as can be seen in the closing song from the first act, “Non-Stop”: “Why do you assume you're the smartest in the room? / Soon that attitude may be your doom!” (Miranda, et al).

Another way in which hip-hop works as the lingua franca in *Hamilton* is through the use of intertextuality, which is a key element in hip-hop culture. David Diallo states that intertextuality “enables the sender of a message to draw a parallel between their own text and a pre-existing one” (44). In *Hamilton*, intertextuality is present through the narrative structure of Chernow’s biography of Hamilton, using Eliza’s life as a coda after Hamilton’s death (Kajikawa, 471). Some other instances of intertextuality regarding music are Hamilton’s verse “I’m only nineteen but my mind is older” from “My Shot”, which is a reference to Modd Deep’s “Shook Ones, Pt 2”; Lauren’s parallel of “redcoats” with police brutality in “Aaron Burr, sir”, which has been considered an allusion to N.W.A’s “F*ck Tha Police”; or Notorius B.I.G’s “Ten Crack Commandments” which inspired *Hamilton*’s “Ten Duel Commandments”, which

interconnects “the illegal actions of street-level drug dealing of the marginalized members of contemporary US society into the heart of the Founder’s mythology” (Kajikawa, 473, 474).

Hamilton has succeeded because it has taken the “language of the people” (McAllister, 280) to criticize a larger socio-political structure. Through hip-hop, the musical denounces Hamilton’s tough childhood in the Caribbean, his struggles when immigrating, Britain’s tyrannical power, the War of Independence and the efforts to define a new nation. The way in which the story of the Founding Father is told mirrors the way famous rappers have accomplished fame. This could be exemplified by establishing a parallelism between Hamilton and the rapper Nas, who was born in a poor neighborhood of Queens, where he drew comics and wrote shorts stories about his life. When putting Hamilton and Nas together, it may seem reasonable to believe that the musical emphasizes the similarities between the Founding Fathers and famous rappers since they all “wrote their way out” —as the musical sings— to a better life.

7. Color-conscious casting in the “Age of Trump”

Apart from the critical voices that this dissertation has dealt with regarding race, there were other opponents to the musical, namely some prominent members of the Republican Party. In 2016, former Vice President Mike Pence went to see the acclaimed Broadway show after Donald Trump won the 2016 elections. Taking into consideration Trump’s policies regarding immigrants, and the importance the musical gives to Hamilton’s Caribbean upbringings —among other ideologies that the show defends that at the same time Trump criticizes— the color-conscious cast decided to deliver a speech that read:

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. 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)

Although Mr. Pence seemed to enjoy the musical and did not complain about the speech, nor about the jeering from outside of Richard Rodgers Theatre; Donald Trump took the matter to Twitter (Figure 4), where he asked his followers to boycott *Hamilton*.

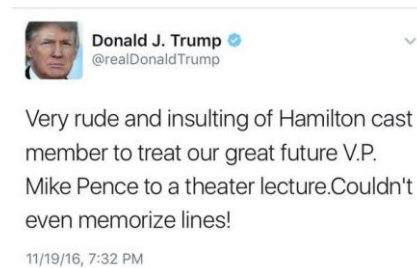


Figure 4: Donald Trump’s tweet against *Hamilton: An American Musical*.

While during the “Age of Obama” *Hamilton* was seen as a symbol of national identity and inclusivity, in the “Age of Trump” this ideology contrasts with the fear of diversity felt by conservatist voters. As a result, Trump’s rejection towards *Hamilton* can be understood as nothing more than a symbolic hostility towards racial diversity. Despite Trump’s attempt of boycotting the musical, the reality is that “this political shift brought a renewed sense of urgency to *Hamilton*” (Kajikawa, 479). Miranda’s parallel between hip-hop and the continuous struggles of Latinx immigrants has led to a political debate about history, diversity, and the way to define US national identity when being an immigrant.

Additionally, it seems that *Hamilton* has served its purpose of setting an example of “color-conscious” casting in other forms of media, beyond Broadway shows. Following this example, *The Bridgertons*, Netflix’s new, Jane-Austen style series, has caused a stir regarding its racial casting for some of the aristocrats of the 18th century England. As it can be seen in Figure 5, even the Queen, whom at the time was

married to King George III—the same king that appears in *Hamilton*—; is played by an African American actress.



Figure 5: Golda Rosheuvel as the Queen along with her servants in *The Bridgertons*. Photographed by the article TVLine.

This form of representation has many positive connotations, from its rejection of “white savior” stereotypes, to a call for more diversity in film. Nonetheless, the main difference between this casting and *Hamilton*’s is that *The Bridgertons* appears to depoliticize history. While *Hamilton*’s casting is “conscious” because there is a clear political message behind it—which, as this dissertation has argued, is reinforced by hip-hop’s critical lyrics—*The Bridgertons* lacks some kind of message behind its casting. Therefore, this cast, rather than being “conscious”, is “color blinded”. The main protagonists, Daphne and the Duke (see Figure 6), face many difficulties throughout their relationship; however, race is never one of them. Since the issue of race is not addressed in the show, the inclusion of actors of color in it has no effect on the story that is being told. The need to have a greater racial diversity is undeniable, especially in period drama; however, as Zhang claims, the history from people of color needs to be addressed, not erased.



Figure 6: Daphne Bridgerton (Phoebe Dynevor) and the Duke of Hastings (Regé-Jean Page) in Netflix advertisement photograph for *The Bridgertons*.

Another famous race-casting-controversy took place in 2016, when the Black actress Noma Dumezweni (see Figure 7) was cast to play Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter and The Cursed Child*. Although both plays—*Hamilton* and *The Cursed Child*—premiered on Broadway the same year, the attitude of critics regarding the racialized casting were the complete opposite. While *Hamilton* was being praised for its “color-conscious” casting, J.K. Rowling had to defend on Twitter that Hermione’s ethnicity was never specified in the books. Most likely the reason behind this controversy has to do with the fact that Hermione’s character lacks a political discourse regarding race, while one of *Hamilton*’s aim is to draw attention to the diversity that exists in the United States.



Figure 7: Noma Dumezweni as Hermione Granger in the promotional photoshoot for *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* in 2016.

In summary, representation in the media is important to the point that a Broadway show like *Hamilton* is able to become a symbol of national identity. Nonetheless, representation should be accompanied by some kind of political message or criticism behind it, because as Lyra D. Monteiro wrote “[w]henver a historical story is shared, it has an ideological component” (98). That is why this dissertation has defended that the critical political lyrics of hip-hop songs provide the critical component that a racial casting on its own could not provide.

8. Conclusion:

Taking everything that has been analyzed into consideration, it can be inferred that hip-hop is the lingua franca of *Hamilton*. It ties together the different genres of music that appear, it defines characters, and it mirrors the “America then” with the “America now”. Furthermore, hip-hop maintains the characteristics that made the genre popular, with the use of intertextuality and critical lyrics. If the musical had been dispensed with hip-hop and relied merely on the “color-conscious” casting, it would have lost most of its message, because hip-hop is a genre often used to criticize situations of socio-political injustices.

Although the issue of a color-conscious casting for the Founding Fathers is controversial, the use of hip-hop works as a unifying thread helping to get the critical message across. Nonetheless, the use of a color-conscious casting should be analyzed bearing in mind that *Hamilton*'s aim is to retell an already known story, not to be historically accurate. Therefore, taking into account that the musical could even be considered a form of fanfiction, the color-conscious casting is part of the “racebending” technique typical of the genre. As a result, *Hamilton* is able to become a symbol of the struggle to redefine national identity, at the same time setting an example for other forms of media to choose a racialized casting. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that in order to have a “conscious” casting, there needs to be an ideological component behind it.

Regarding the glossing over the issue of slavery, it could be concluded that it is a delicate matter. On the one hand, its absence suggests the creation of a narrative where slavery did not exist, when it obviously did. On the other hand, having the Founding Fathers sing about the abolition of slavery would have perpetuated a historically inaccurate idea of the Founding Fathers, which ultimately would have been even more

disrespectful to people of color. As a result, this dissertation defends that although *Hamilton*'s commitment to the issue of slavery is brief, it is this middle ground approach that provides the musical with enough critical lyricism without falling into the depoliticization of history. Besides, the color-conscious casting and the power of hip-hop turns *Hamilton* into a successful retelling of "America then" that does not ignore the realities and concerns of the present.

9. Works cited:

- AAPAC. "Ethnic Representation on New York City". The Asian American Performers Action Coalition, 2015-2016.
http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_20152016_10year_report.pdf
- Arivett, Erika. "The Timeliness of Hamilton: An American Musical". *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 2020, pp. 126–144.
- Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton*. Penguin Press, 2004.
- Craft, Elizabeth Titrington. "Headfirst into an Abyss: The Politics and Political Reception of *Hamilton*." *American Music*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2018, pp. 429–447, doi:10.5406/americanmusic.36.4.0429.
- Diallo, David. "Intertextuality in Rap Lyrics." *Revue Française d Etudes Américaines*, vol. 142, no. 1, 2015, pp. 40–54, doi:10.3917/rfea.142.0040.
- Foulkes, Julia L. "Seeing the City: the Filming of West Side Story." *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 41, no. 6, 2015, pp. 1032–1051., doi:10.1177/0096144215602013.
- Frazer-Carroll, Micha. "It's Dangerous Not to See Race': Is Colour-Blind Casting All It's Cracked up to Be?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 11 Aug. 2020, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/aug/11/its-dangerous-not-to-see-race-is-colour-blind-casting-all-its-cracked-up-to-be.
- Galella, Donatella. "Being in 'The Room Where It Happens': Hamilton, Obama, and Nationalist Neoliberal Multicultural Inclusion." *Theatre Survey*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2018, pp. 363–385, doi:10.1017/s0040557418000303.
- Galella, Donatella. "Redefining America, Arena Stage, and Territory Folks in a Multiracial Oklahoma!" *Theatre Journal*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2015, pp. 213–233., doi:10.1353/tj.2015.0054.

- Hopkins, Kristin Bria. “There's No Business Like Show Business: Abandoning Color-Blind Casting and Embracing Color-Conscious Casting in American Theatre.” *Harv. J. Sports & Ent. L.*, vol. 9, 2018, pp. 132–136.
- Kajikawa, Loren. “‘Young, Scrappy, and Hungry’: *Hamilton*, Hip Hop, and Race.” *American Music*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2018, pp. 467–486, doi:10.5406/americanmusic.36.4.0467.
- Jadhvani, Lavina. “Color-Conscious Casting: Three Questions to Ask.” *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, 21 Dec. 2014.
- Glenn, Kenneth Lyles. “Breaking the Color Barrier: Actors of Color in Traditionally White Roles.” *Master of Arts Thesis*, University of Nebraska, 1994, pp. 8–15.
- McAllister, Marvin. “Toward a More Perfect *Hamilton*.” *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2017, pp. 279–288, doi:10.1353/jer.2017.0024.
- McCarter, Jeremy, and Lin-Manuel Miranda. *Hamilton The Revolution*. Grand Central Publishing, 2016.
- Mele, Christopher, and Patrick Healy. “‘Hamilton’ Had Some Unscripted Lines for Pence. Trump Wasn't Happy.” *The New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/us/mike-pence-hamilton.html.
- Miranda, Lin-Manuel. “Battle #3 Was Cut for Time Because None of Them Ended It <https://t.co/zPGpn9Ueke>.” *Twitter*, 2 Feb. 2016, twitter.com/lin_manuel/status/694616452092018688.
- Miranda, Lin-Manuel, et al. *Hamilton: Original Broadway Cast Recording*, Atlantic Records.
- Monteiro, Lyra D. “Review Essay: Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*.” *The Public Historian*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2016, pp. 89–98, doi:10.1525/tph.2016.38.1.89.

- Naden, Corinne J. *The Golden Age of American Musical Theatre 1943-1965*. Scarecrow Press, 2011.
- Obenreder, Gail. "Home." *Delaware Shakespeare*, 29 Nov. 2020, delshakes.org/2020/11/two-perspectives-on-color-blind-vs-color-conscious-casting-in-shakespeare/.
- Onuoha, Mimi. "Broadway Won't Document Its Race Problem, so a Group of Actors Quietly Gathered the Data Themselves." *Quartz*, 2016, qz.com/842610/broadways-race-problem-is-unmasked-by-data-but-the-theater-industry-is-still-stuck-in-neutral/.
- Owen, Ken. "Historians and Hamilton: Founders Chic and the Cult of Personality." *The Junto*, 21 Apr. 2016, earlyamericanists.com/2016/04/21/historians-and-hamilton-founders-chic-and-the-cult-of-personality/.
- Patterson, Laura Long. "The Meaning of the Body in Performance: Cross-Cultural Casting and Racial Identity." *San Jose State University, SJSU Master's Theses*, 2000, p. 2.
- Reneau, Annie. "Hamilton's Missing 'Cabinet Battle #3' Addresses the Slavery Issue the Show Glossed Over." *Upworthy*, 9 July 2020, www.upworthy.com/hamiltons-missing-cabinet-battle-3-addresses-some-of-the-shows-slavery-criticisms.
- Romano, Aja. "Hamilton Is Fanfic, and Its Historical Critics Are Totally Missing the Point." *Vox*, 14 Apr. 2016, www.vox.com/2016/4/14/11418672/hamilton-is-fanfic-not-historically-inaccurate.
- Shaw, Gabbi. "How Lin-Manuel Miranda's Non-Stop Work Ethic from a Young Age Made 'Hamilton' One of the Most Successful Musicals of All Time." *Business Insider*, 23 Jan. 2021, www.businessinsider.com/lin-manuel-miranda-work-ethic-hamilton-success-2017-12.

- Taylor, Chris. "Hamilton' Deleted Songs: How to Put Them Back in the Narrative." *Mashable*, 20 July 2020, mashable.com/article/hamilton-cut-songs-disney-plus/?europa=true.
- Thinnes, Cynthia. "Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton and Slavery." *Quiet Heroines*, 29 Sept. 2020, quietheroines.com/elizabeth-schuyler-hamilton-who-lives-who-dies-who-tells-your-story/elizabeth-schuyler-hamilton-and-slavery/.
- Umehira, Kylie. "All Hammed Up: How *Hamilton: An American Musical* Addresses Post-Racial Beliefs." *WR Journal of the CAS Writing Program*, no. 9, 2016-17, pp. 103–111.
- Zhang, Max. "Bridgerton Proves That Color-Conscious Casting Alone Is Not Good Enough." *The Georgetown Voice*, 30 Mar. 2021, georgetownvoice.com/2021/03/30/color-conscious-casting/