

“An American Story Incomplete”: Color-Conscious Casting and Representations of the Black Past in *Hamilton: the Revolution*

The first death of the American Revolution was the public murder of an unarmed Afro-Indigenous man. Crispus Attucks’ death echoes the realities of both blackness and indigeneity in America. Despite this historical relevance, he is not the subject composer, playwright, and creator of *Hamilton: the Revolution*, Lin-Manuel Miranda includes in the narrative around early American history. In *Hamilton*, there exists no historical Black figures, yet history reminds us that black people were very involved in the American Revolution. This only serves to further exclude people of color from being a part of history as we know it.

The lack of historical black figures makes history appear inaccessible to black people, and removes their voice from the narrative. It creates a privileged space black people don’t have access to. “With a cast dominated by actors of color, the play is nonetheless yet another rendition of the “exclusive past”, with its focus on the deeds of “great white men” and its silencing of the presence and contributions of people of color in the Revolutionary era”(Monteiro 90). In Lyra D. Monteiro’s essay *Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Miranda’s Hamilton*, we are reminded of how much whiteness plays a role in the formation of the play. The toxic exclusivity that surrounds history is not addressed but expanded without any sense of accountability. The erasure of the role of people of color in the American Revolution is continued with a new validity afforded by the supporting narrative in *Hamilton the Musical*.

The call for non-white actors in a hip-hop musical about founding father Alexander Hamilton was and continues to be controversial. It began strong discussion surrounding racism in the theatre community and how that impacted opportunities available to actors of color. The casting process was initially referred to as color-blind casting and later color conscious casting. Color conscious and color blind casting are two different ideas about how race should be considered when casting, both grapple with how that impacts the formation of the character. Color conscious casting means recognition of how the experiences of marginalized people shape their identity and culture. It’s an awareness of the realities of both the actor and the character and considers lived experiences as valid.

Color blind casting claims to not be informed by the physical appearance or the background of a person. They're judged exclusively on their creative abilities. Many believe negating such an essential part of both the character and the actor does a disservice to the integrity of the production, and is impossible to achieve. "'Color-blind casting," as it is often called, is clearly not possible unless our society itself becomes color-blind" (Hornby 460). Color blind casting neglects to acknowledge non-visible racialized social cues that often inform bias. Dialect, tone, and names are often associated with specific racial and/or ethnic groups and can be used as points of discrimination.

In an interview, Lin-Manuel Miranda stated that "Our cast looks like America looks now, and that's certainly intentional", he said. "It's a way of pulling you into the story and allowing you to leave whatever cultural baggage you have about the founding fathers at the door". Black people playing historical white figures does not extract whiteness from the narrative. Whiteness is the center of the story, it is because of that Miranda asserts we leave "cultural baggage" at the door. The "cultural baggage" being the compounding amount of evidence implicating the founding fathers as participants and orchestrators of the genocide and enslavement of black and brown bodies. It serves as a terrible irony to see the descendants of these victims play the founding father with such admiration. "More pointedly, it is problematic to have black and brown actors stand in for the great white men of the early United States in a play that does not acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from freedoms for which the founders fought" (Monteiro 93). Their authority as white men of status and privilege radiates through history, allowing them an untouchable space of exclusivity. This further erases the historical oppression of people of color and affirming the use of black bodies for entertainment while dismissing the stories.

"Our cast looks like America looks now" is a continuation of the idea that people of color have not been instrumental in the formation and foundation of American history. The American past includes black people; we do not need to be drafted into history. When looking at the cast, which is overwhelmingly comprised of light-skinned and mixed-race black actors, I question its claim to accessibility. The issue of colorism, discrimination based on complexion, puts into context this layer of questioning. The politics around using lighter skinned black people to represent the broader community of black people, serves to alienate dark skinned black people. Lighter skinned black people have historically operated with a privilege their perceived

proximity to whiteness affords them. Miranda neglects to acknowledge that privilege, and extracts both historical black figures and dark skinned people from the broader narrative. Following in the footsteps of acceptability politics, the play becomes a showcase for light skinned and/or mixed-race black people, and whether intentionally or unintentionally excludes much needed images of dark skinned black people.

Black people were strategically interwoven into the everyday lives of white people yet there is not distinct point in the play where their existence is acknowledged. In white households, exploited black labor would have meant the presence of a black person existed in every room. Even moments when character claims to be alone, an exploited individual would have likely been present. “During the revolutionary era, around 14 percent of New York City’s inhabitants were African American, the majority of who were enslaved. In the Caribbean the numbers were much higher. In the 1790’s a slave was present in one of every five of the cities white households” (Monteiro 93). The play makes no attempt to acknowledge or identify those individuals but allows the same historical erasure of their memory to continue.

The issue of slavery is mentioned numerous times often without full context that does an injustice to victims of the institution of slavery. The way the play virtually dismisses the issue disrupts the historical landscape of the time period. I’m not calling for an entire play that recounts the abuses endured during slavery, but as people who operate off the privilege of not having been born in bondage they’re accountable for the inclusion of those narratives. Enslaved people cannot be briefly mentioned, they must have the same space and complexity afforded to slaveholders.

In Cabinet Battle #3, Hamilton is locked in a discussion about the longevity of slavery in America. While he represents the abolitionist perspective, Thomas Jefferson voices the concerns of white southern landowners. Slavery becomes a point which establishes the moral or immoral behavior of a character. Hamilton says:

“Yet still, people follow like lemmings,

All your hemming and hawing, while you're hee-hawing with Sally Hemings.”

Sally Hemings has historically been identified as the enslaved mistress of Thomas Jefferson. The common narrative is that they were in a long sexual relationship resulting in Hemings having six of his children. This damaging assessment neglects that Jefferson owned her and that she was an enslaved person without any space to reject sexual advances, that wouldn’t

result in her death. There were no attempts at manumission made by Jefferson, and she spent her entire life excluding the last nine years in bondage. Though unpopular, I would classify all sexual interactions between the two as rape. *Hamilton the Musical* does nothing to present a different version of the Hemings narrative but instead uses her memory to throw slick jabs at Jefferson's character. She is used not because of Hamilton's abolitionist convictions but out of convenience. That is how slavery is used throughout the play, a convenient tool to make petty comments, never discussed as a massive contradiction to their belief in the equality of man. The brief mentions of slavery are entirely informed by who is speaking and who is being spoken to. Hamilton uses Jefferson's position as a slaveholder to diminish his character while never mentioning his own ties to the slave trade. Slavery is weaponized throughout the play, as a way to either uplift or demean white characters.

Cabinet Battle #1

"Would you like to join us, or stay mellow
Doin' whatever the hell it is you do in Monticello?
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."

In cabinet battle #1, Hamilton implies that Jefferson's concerns about who will assume the Country's growing debt are baseless. He makes a personal attack against Jefferson based on Jefferson's role as a southern slaveholder. It is not to put the issue of slavery on the forefront but to diminish Jefferson's moral credibility. Other characters in the play are not held accountable for their role in slavery because it only serves to create commentary surrounding the morality of their character. Their main concern is their own morality and how it is implicated not the rights of the enslaved. George Washington stands as a witness and an authority figure during the cabinet battle. His role is mentioned but is not held accountable for his role in slavery or bias in decision making. Being a southern slaveholder informs his decisions and determines whether or not slavery will expand as an institutional norm. In Cabinet Battle #3 Hamilton address Washington's relationship to slavery directly:

"Sir, even you, you have hundreds of slaves

Whose descendants will curse our names when we're safe in our graves?

How will the south find labor for its businesses?

How will Thomas Jefferson find his next mistresses?"

This tone is very different from the hostile tone he used when talking about Jefferson. He does not make inferences about the immorality of Washington's participation and lets him off easy without acknowledging that Washington and Jefferson are two sides of the same coin. Washington is not implicated, yet history reports that he had a profound impact on the lives of people of color. Attempts at "founders chic", where historians rewrite the lives of the founding fathers extracting crucial details from the narrative, is part of the erasure of black and brown people. Not mentioning Washington's actions alleviates him of responsibility placing him on a pedestal that makes him untouchable and unaccountable. Washington along with other founding fathers are permitted a historical duality that allows them to be slaveholders and freedom fighters.

Miranda neglects to acknowledge Hamilton's role in slavery and his contributions to the preservation of slavery. The deliberate omission of Hamilton's role in the slave trade is beyond suspicious. Both Lin-Manuel Miranda and Ron Chernow, author of biography *Alexander Hamilton*, both emphasize Hamilton's membership in the New York Manumission Society, though neither emphasize the slaveholding status of the Schuyler family. Though historians claim Hamilton was an abolitionist, he did not operate in the interest of abolishing slavery. He expressing "sympathetic views" toward the plight of the enslaved does nothing for those in bondage if he does not use his platform to change the circumstances. Enslaved people did not just need his membership, they needed him to not participate in the institution of slavery. Hamilton was involved in the business of trafficking and purchasing slaves as a legal representative, he rented slave labor from slave holders, it is also indicated that Hamilton's mother was a slaveholder at the time of her death; slaves her sons inherited but were unable to claim.

The play takes on a strong abolitionist tone that extracts the responsibility of the writers to be honest about the circumstances. "I speak out against slavery. You could have done so much more if only you had. Time." Eliza says mistakenly centering "time" as the issue. Ignoring all opportunities Hamilton had to change the narrative. Within the New York Manumission Society advances were made in ending the international slave trade and abolishing slavery in New York.

None of this improved the lives of slaves, who were overwhelmingly located in the south or the series of other issues affecting the lives of the thousands in bondage.

“Who Lives? Who Dies? Who tells your story?” What does it mean when you have been extracted from the narrative? The tearful moment where Eliza states “I’m erasing myself from the narrative”, highlights her privilege in having the agency to make that decision. People of color did not choose to erase themselves, but were forcibly removed. The narrative was built on the backs of the marginalized and Hamilton the Musical does not disrupt that notion. Actors of color playing white historical figures with the enthusiasm that uplifts those figures can be problematic.

The narrative around Alexander Hamilton has been altered to appease the predominantly audiences who still require digestible images of blackness dictated by whiteness to watch the show. Ultimately the play does nothing to shift the racism that prioritizes white narratives above black narratives. Hamilton the musical rises to its current prominence because it is still a story about a white man, even if a black man operates as a temporary face for the story. The ultimate authority is given to white men and their stories with no sense of accountability included. Color blind casting and color conscious casting do not alter the realities of the way history is told. The issue is who decides what story is told and how it is told. A play about the foundations of America that doesn't include the lives of black and brown people is empty. By not including black and brown narratives the play is an incomplete story of early American history.

The term “accessible” is often used when describing the racial dynamics of the play. The idea is, by inserting black actors into the lives of white men makes the story more accessible to people. “—the Broadway League finds that about 80 percent of all Broadway ticket buyers are white. This does not stop creators and spectators from repeatedly calling the musical “accessible”, which is coded language suggesting that young people and people of color cannot understand history unless it is made accessible” (Monteiro 98) . One of the implications of accessibility is that black actors become expendable marketing tools. Black bodies are objectified in the play as they are through history. It is not about individuals but the doors that are opened simply by having black people facilitate the already made narrative. It is not about individuals but how many seats can be filled even when pricing out the people they’re trying to talk to.

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