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Hamilton: Bringing Together the Past and the Present

When people normally think about theater, they usually think about Shakespeare or the crazy Drama club from high school. When one thinks about musicals, one rarely connects them to Hip Hop, Rap, and other forms of popular music. However, that all changed when *Hamilton: An American Musical* made its debut on Broadway on August 6, 2015. Created by Lin-Manuel Miranda, both the playwright and star of the show, who began writing the play in 2009, the musical, through forms of music based off of Hip Hop, Rap, R&B, American Pop, and even British Pop, tells the story of Treasury Secretary and founding father Alexander Hamilton and his involvement in the American Revolution and the beginning of the United States. The musical wraps around Hamilton's life, focusing not on just the historical events he was a part of, such as the Battle of Yorktown, the creation of the Federalist Papers, and the creation of the US national bank, but also the personal life he had with other historical figures, such as Aaron Burr his eventual killer, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. Not only do we get a taste of history set so intimately in front of us, but we also get a combination of the past and the present. With music based off of songs from popular artists, such as Beyoncé, The Notorious B.I.G., Busta Rhymes, and much more, it is not a wonder that *Hamilton* has become so popular with the young generations of today. But the most astounding element of the musical is not its musical elements. Instead, it is its amazing ability to tell the story of white male and female historical figures

through a cast full of people of different ethnic backgrounds. Miranda, in an interview with Jeffery Brown from *PBS*, stated that when developing the show, he wanted to make “the founders of our country look like what our country looks like now. ... And this is what our country looks like now.” By only casting people of color, *Hamilton* creates a striking conversation between the past and the present. In representing the major figures of the war with people of color, the show forms a new and unique way of remembering the American Revolution.

So what exactly is the conversation that *Hamilton* is creating? During the American Revolution, the American colonists fought against the British soldiers for independence from the British government. The core of the revolution lay with the American belief in liberty and justice. These beliefs are what *Hamilton* embodies. In the first act, which is solely placed during the time of the Revolutionary War, the characters sing songs about wanting freedom from the oppression of the British government. But today, we are free from the British. In fact, we are now allies with them. So what oppressing force can we connect *Hamilton* to today, especially with its ethnically diverse cast? With a cast of people of color playing white individuals, the message behind this casting choice is obvious. *Hamilton* is addressing the racial issues of modern society with the issues of oppression that caused the American Revolution to happen. The show allows its audience to witness a new telling of a commonly known event in history and relate to it. By creating a new public memory of the American Revolution, through a combination of modern music, modern actors, and a set of values, such as equality and justice, present both in the past and in the present, Lin-Manuel Miranda and the rest of the *Hamilton* family seek to influence people to take a stand against racism, as well as understand this racism

in a new way.

In order to analyze *Hamilton*'s public memory of the American Revolution, an understanding of public memory of the United States is required. What exactly is public memory? In his book "Remaking America: Public memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century," John Bodnar discusses how the United States treats its history over the years. He argues that public memory is a "body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future," meaning public memory is ideas and beliefs of historical events that allow people to both connect to the past and to the present (Bodnar 15). Each generation of people remembers historical events differently in order to create a relevancy to the unseen issues present in modern society. Bodnar's definition of public memory is exactly the definition that describes *Hamilton* is doing. In creating a new public memory of the American Revolution, one that features a cast of only people of color, the show addresses the presence of the diversity in modern American society. By placing these people in a war that was fought for equality and freedom, *Hamilton* fights for equal opportunity and representation for people of non-white origins. In the book, Bodnar analyzes public memory of America by studying what has been done to create a memory of the United States, then by studying the different ethnic parts of American memory before finally analyzing the different kinds of representation of American memory. Although he does not analyze theatric productions that attempt to create a public memory of the Revolutionary War, he still does offer the same effect of public memory that *Hamilton* has on its audience. *Hamilton* is still, just like Bodnar's definition of public memory suggests, trying to connect the values held during the war to the racial issues of today.

In support of Bodnar's definition of public memory, Barry Schwartz, in his article "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory," promotes the idea that the events of the past still have a relevance to modern society. Schwartz observes the commemoration of historical events, specifically the American Revolution and the American Civil War, and how it has integrated into public memory. In the article, he studies the commemorative iconography found in the United States Capitol Building and analyzes select pieces featured, the words of other historians who have observed the representations of the early years of the United States, and the public trends of the most popular historical events commemorate. Based on his study, Schwartz concludes that the events of the America's past are not symbols of the ideals of America because of their importance, rather, they are symbols because the people of the present make them important (Schwartz 396). Just as Bodnar states, Schwartz emphasizes how the memory can turn the ideals of the past into equivalent ideals held in the present. In relation to *Hamilton*, whose form of media is a musical theater production, it is difficult to see its relation to the iconography that Schwartz observes in the Capitol Building. Perhaps, if Schwartz had observed other types of media representations and commemorations of the Revolution, he would have found more to analyze the effects of public memory of the Revolution on modern-day ideals. However, because *Hamilton* had created a discussion on its effects of the memory of both the Revolution and the early United States, it is safe to say that Schwartz's argument is relevant to the show. Schwartz also focuses more on the commemoration of the Revolution, rather than interpretations of it. Commemoration is a form of honoring, while interpretation is a form of giving or finding meaning. Schwartz does not take into consideration the forms of art that share a different interpretation of the war. *Hamilton* is an interpretation of

the events of the Revolution that addresses the equality and justice issues of the past and the present. Since Schwartz argues for the commemoration of the Revolution, it is difficult, in accordance with Schwartz's argument, to discern the commemorative elements of *Hamilton* and its interpretation of the war.

In order to find the public memory that *Hamilton* creates, a look at other public memories of the Revolution is needed so we can understand why *Hamilton*'s memory of the Revolution differs from the rest. In his book, *Fighting over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution*, Andrew M. Schocket directly analyzes the public memory of the American Revolution in the twenty-first century, though excluding *Hamilton* as was still in development at the time of the book's writing. He argues that there are many ways to comprehend and interpret the American Revolution, and we must be conscious about how we understand each of them in correlation with the issues of modern society, such as, again, racism and equality. Schocket begins his study of the public memory of the Revolution and the founding fathers by analyzing modern political speeches and debates, best-selling non-fiction books about the Revolution, historical sites honoring the Revolution, organizations trying to revive the relevance of the war, and finally, the most pertinent to *Hamilton*, film and television about or set during the Revolution. Because of his focus on modern media, it is easy to see the sort of scholarly conversation it has with the show. Both film and television have a live audience present during a showing, just as *Hamilton* has a live audience there to watch the show up close. Even all three have a sort of story to tell about the Revolution, with the musical telling its story in the perspective of the characters present in Alexander Hamilton's life. The only problem with using forms of entertainment to convey a memory of history is the transformation of a historical event

into a story. Forms of entertainment must change some sort of aspect of the event, such as the timeline of the event, the people actually involved they are based on, in order to become more relevant and engaging to their audience. With film and television, they are filled with dramatic effects, romanticized events, and exaggeration. This is what *Hamilton* does, in a way. In order to keep its audience engaged, it creates slight historical inaccuracies, such as the love triangle between the two Schuyler sisters and Hamilton or the way in which certain characters, like Thomas Jefferson, are portrayed with exaggerated flamboyance, begging the question: can we trust *Hamilton's* interpretation of the Revolution to represent the past?

While many people trust that *Hamilton's* representation of the Revolution successfully addresses the issues of modern society, others disagree, such as Lyra D. Monteiro. Monteiro, an assistant professor of history in the Graduate Program at Rutgers University, in an essay about the show, evaluates *Hamilton's* attempt at addressing the racial issues both during the Revolution and in modern American society. Instead of claiming that the diversity of *Hamilton's* cast honors people of color, Monteiro disagrees, asserting that the casting of people of color, specifically African Americans, removes the memory of real people of color that were involved in the American Revolution. She analyzes how the show mainly focuses on the white males known to have large parts in the Revolutionary War and the forming of the United States of America, with little to no mention of people of color present at the time, such as the Native Americans and the African American slaves. In accordance with the memory of the Revolution today, she also argues that the show is not as revolutionary as the cast and critics have been claiming, due to the false sense of accessibility to a wide audience that the show claims to have. By observing the demographics of the Broadway audience, who are mainly upper middle class or high class, white

individuals, Monteiro claims that *Hamilton*'s reach is not as big as it is advertised to be.

According to her, the people the show tries to reach are in fact unable to access the show. In a way, Monteiro's claims are justified, because the high cost of just one Broadway show can reach well over one hundred dollars. Because of the social hierarchy present in the United States, most of the people that can afford to pay that amount of money, multiplied by the number of people accompanying them, are mainly white. However, although Monteiro's claims are completely justifiable and logical, Monteiro fails to notice that the show's accessibility is not limited to seeing the show in person.

When most people today have access to the internet, is Monteiro's claim that *Hamilton* is actually inaccessible to the audience that it is trying to reach? My first exposure to the show was through a group of friends who are heavily invested in musical theater. They had discovered the musical just a few months after its debut, maybe October or November of 2015. Being slow to catch on in the Broadway musical world, at the time, I didn't understand why the show was so popular. Why would a musical about the founding fathers, or history in that matter, be so popular? But upon further reflection about why my friends kept insisting I start looking up *Hamilton*, I realized that *Les Miserables* was a musical about history, so I should give it a shot. It wasn't until the cast album was officially released that I officially became too obsessed with the show. Once they released the album, it was all I could listen to. The album was released on several platforms, including *iTunes*, *Spotify*, *Amazon*, *Google Play*, and, much to the delight of fans who would rather not pay money for the near twenty-dollar album, *YouTube*. YouTube also offers a multitude of videos of *Hamilton*. Various videos of the show, released by the official *Broadway.com* publicity team and news segments of the show, are available online to watch.

With free access to the album and preview clips of some of the show's most popular scenes, it was easy to see why the music of *Hamilton* was becoming so popular, even enough to eventually win the Grammy for Best Musical Theater Album after performing the opening for the show entitled "Alexander Hamilton". By receiving such a high-esteemed award, *Hamilton* proves that its music creates a new public memory of the Revolution and how the people of today learn about it.

Hamilton relies heavily on the music of the show since most of the dialog is actually sung or rapped instead of said. A lot of the public memory of the Revolution addressing racial issues of today relies on the narrative of Hamilton's life during the Revolution told through specific genres of music. Lin-Manuel Miranda, during the first performance of the show's opening "Alexander Hamilton" at the White House Poetry Jam in 2009, said that Alexander Hamilton "embodies Hip Hop ...all in the strength of his writing. I think he embodies the word's ability to make a difference" (The White House). Most of the songs are based off the popular genres of Hip Hop, Rap, and R&B, which are mostly affiliated with African Americans, who make up most of the main cast. Lin-Manuel Miranda, who while writing the play also wrote all the music inspired by these popular genres, created and released the songs that inspired the songs of *Hamilton*. For example, one of the first few songs, entitled "Helpless", performed by the show's Elizabeth Schuyler, who eventually marries Alexander Hamilton in the same scene that the song is performed, is heavily based off of Beyoncé's song "Countdown", even down to the beat. Eliza sings about her first meeting with Hamilton at the Winter's Ball of 1780, leading up to how he courts her for a few weeks before finally marrying her. She sings that she's "down for the count" for Hamilton's eyes, which is a direct reference to the title of Beyoncé's song. Then later, after

Eliza and Hamilton meet and they've been sending letters to each other for weeks, she narrates "Two weeks later in the living room stressin' / My father stoned-faced while you're asking for his blessin'." Both ends of these lines form an emphasis on their last word ("stressin'" and 'blessin'"). In "Countdown", Beyoncé sings "Me and my boo in the coupe lip locking / All up in the back because the chicks keep flocking". In both of these songs, the singer emphasizes the last words of each line. Philippa Soo, the actress who plays Eliza, even imitates the way that Beyoncé sings the lines. This imitation of popular music allows the audience to make a connection between the past and the present. In connecting the past and the present through song, *Hamilton* demonstrates how, although we have moved forward and changed from the past, there is still some connection between yesterday and today. However, in order to make a direct connection between the American Revolution and popular music and understand this connection, we have to look at a song that actually features the war.

One prominent scene in the musical that creates a new public memory of the Revolution through modern music is the scene set in the Battle of Yorktown, towards the end of Act 1. According to official history, provided by David Curtis Skaggs, the Battle began in September of 1781 and ended later that October. The British forces in Yorktown have split into two groups and Hamilton was to lead one portion of the American army to assault one of the British groups, while another group was led by French Major General the Marquis de Lafayette. In the musical, Hamilton, after taking a leave from the war to be with his pregnant wife Eliza, finally returns to the field to fight the British forces in parallel to Lafayette. During this scene, the company sings the song entitled, "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)", or simply "Yorktown" for our convenience. While Hamilton and Lafayette reunite on the battlefield, they converse to the beat

of the song:

COMPANY. The Battle of Yorktown. 1781.

LAFAYETTE. Monsieur Hamilton.

HAMILTON. Monsieur Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE. In command where you belong.

HAMILTON. How you say, no sweat.

We're finally on the field. We've had quite a run.

Immigrants:

BOTH. We get the job done!

Behind the two conversing, the orchestra plays music appropriate for the time of the Revolution. In the background, we hear violins playing the melody of the song, while the drumming, like that of a drummer boy out on the field, keeps the beat of the song. This sounds like the traditional music that one would expect to hear from the 18th century. However, *Hamilton* adds its own twist. Throughout the song, you can hear the mixing of a disc jockey, or a DJ, mixing the music of the song live. You hear the sounds that a DJ makes on the turntable, such as record scratching. Adding this modern flare to an old style of music allows for a harmony between the music of the past and the music of today. The synthesis of the two generations of music in relation to a major battle of the Revolution allows for a new public memory of the war through music, because we, as the audience, recognize the difference between the old and the new, yet still find the combination of the two to be appealing. In addition to creating a public memory of the Revolution through both old and modern music, "Yorktown" also addresses racial issues concerning immigrants. As a child of two Filipino immigrants, I can say from experience that

immigrants are often underestimated and socially oppressed. Immigrants are often stereotyped, like Mexican immigrants with gardening, Italian immigrants with pizza, and Asian immigrants with bad driving. However, when both Hamilton and Lafayette sing the line “Immigrants: We get the job done!”, immigrants in the audience attach to that feeling of overcoming underestimation and stereotypes in the United States. Even the crowd during the performance I watched cheered when the two exclaimed this. Even with such a small line the show creates a large sentiment toward immigrants facing racial stereotypes.

Because *Hamilton* is so heavily based on Hip Hop, Rap, and R&B, all heavily dominated by African Americans, it begs the question why this show focuses on people of color. Many of the main cast may be African American actors and actresses, such as Daveed Diggs, who plays Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson, Chris Jackson, who plays George Washington, and Renée Elise Goldsberry, who plays Angelica Schuyler, Eliza’s older sister, many of the cast represent other ethnic groups. Lin-Manuel Miranda himself is Puerto Rican, which was highlighted in a previous musical of his called *In the Heights*, about the Puerto Ricans living in New York. Anthony Ramos plays John Laurens and Philip Hamilton, Alexander and Eliza’s eldest son, and Javier Muñoz, Miranda’s understudy, is also of Puerto Rican descent. Phillipa Soo, our beloved Eliza, is a young 26-year-old actress from a Chinese-American family. During the times of the Revolution, the main focus of racism was the white men versus the black slaves brought over from Africa. *Hamilton*’s cast shows that today, it is much more than that. Today, there are ethnic groups from around the world living in the United States. The problem is, however, that although the American population has evolved to become more than just the white men and women who owned African slaves and rebelled against the British government, the racism present during the

Revolution evolved as well, spreading not only African Americans but to other people of color.

Just as Bodnar states in his understanding of public memory, the events of the past, including the values that the people of that time held dear, remain in the present, applying to any issues that modern society is dealing with. While seemingly just a unique, modernized take on the American Revolution, *Hamilton* tries to achieve the status as an eye-catching public memory of the Revolution. During the Revolution, the colonists fought for equality and justice from the British government, the power that the colonists believed to be oppressing them. They did not believe they had equality with the main British citizens when Parliament began taxing the colonists without them having a proper representative in Parliament, thus coining the phrase, “No taxation without representation!” (Price). Today, people of color feel the same way. People of color feel oppressed by the stereotypes formed by modern racism. Modern society stereotype African Americans and African immigrants to being gangsters or drug dealers, Hispanic Americans and immigrants to being illegal immigrants, Middle Eastern Americans and immigrants being terrorists, and Asian Americans and immigrants to being foreigners, among many other stereotypical judgments for people of color (Shoichet; Cepeda; Wu). Much like the colonists, people of color are searching for equality and justice from a predominantly white society. *Hamilton* attempts to demonstrate this parallelism between the past and the present social issues in America by combining historical events with elements of the present, the modern music that we’ve talked about and the ethnically diverse cast that represents the people of color who are often unrepresented or misrepresented in the media. The Revolution is the original symbol for the American values of equality and justice. By relating to these values and America as a whole, *Hamilton* spreads its reach not just to people of color and those who oppose racism,

but to everyone who holds dear both the history of America and the values held by American patriotic society. Because of how modern the show is, it has blown up American, and probably foreign, society to become a popular musical that represents old American values from an origin war to its later generations who seek the same values but for different reasons.

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