

# Re:Search

## *Hamilton's* Shoutout: On a Trope that Silences

Miranda Brookshier, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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### ABSTRACT

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Lin-Manuel Miranda's Grammy-winning musical, *Hamilton*, is praised for its integration of a diverse cast in the production of "a story about American then, told by America now." This show is applauded for its use of contemporary rap and hip-hop music and its portrayal of Founding Fathers by men of color, thus allowing all viewers to revel in a shared, triumphant past. Despite *Hamilton's* renown, critics have challenged the hypocrisy in Miranda's casting, which allows people of color to portray the very white men who perpetuated a cycle of oppression through chattel slavery. While critics question the racialization of characters and the music, these historical analyses have failed to consider the lyrics' influence in recapitulating a vision of the Revolutionary era as "whites only," regardless of who is cast. In this essay, I argue that *Hamilton's* success hinders on an incomplete view of the Founding Fathers, opting to memorialize their noble legacies and elide a troubling history with slavery. Through a close analysis of the show's lyrics and a consideration into the intersections of race and gender, readers will see how this production ultimately centers white men and minimizes the experiences of enslavement for black women.

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### KEYWORDS

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*Hamilton*, Hamilton Musical, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Slavery, Race, Gender, Intersectionality, Representation, Casting

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Following the cast's performance of *Hamilton*'s opening number and Lin-Manuel Miranda's acceptance of the Grammy for best musical theater album during the 2016 Grammy Awards, *Google* experienced a spike of queries, which asked "Who is Alexander Hamilton?" (Kircher). Since that broadcasted performance of "Alexander Hamilton," the show has become a phenomenon throughout the United States, often praised for its integration of a diverse cast in the production of "a story about American then, told by America now" (Kail qtd. by Miranda and McCarter 33<sup>1</sup>). The musical is known for its use of modern rap and hip-hop music, its contemporary dance styles, and its portrayal of the Founding Fathers—Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington—by men of color. Ticket sales, album sales, and social media trends provide evidence of *Hamilton*'s success in the United States; critics also point to its blending of hip hop and casting choices as dynamic keys to that success. However, beyond the spectacle of the musical as a Broadway hit, its actual content fails to challenge a whitewashed history of America.

Instead, *Hamilton* serves as a twenty-first-century reproduction of eighteenth-century pastoral depictions of Revolutionary America, such as the scenes in paintings by John Trumbull. This effect is achieved in the show's presentation of an idealized, inclusive American history through the show's multiracial cast. Audiences seem to be completely invested in the diverse cast, claiming it allows the show to be more engaging for all—white people and people of color alike. Even cast member Leslie Odom, Jr., who played Aaron Burr, noted that "playing a Founding Father has made him feel newly invested in the country's origins, something that always seemed remote from his life as a black man in America" (Miranda and McCarter 160). However, in portraying this image of a diverse early Republic, the show mitigates the plot's whiteness. John Trumbull's paintings and Miranda's musical seek to memorialize an honorable American history, yet, as Miranda writes in *The Hamilton Mixtape*, "The reality is messier and richer, kids / The reality is not a pretty picture, kids" ("No John Trumbull"). This paper will show how *Hamilton*'s lyrics recapitulate a vision of the early republic as "whites only,"

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, references are given to three separate works by Lin-Manuel Miranda, including: 1) the original soundtrack, *Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, 2) the supplementary book that was written in conjunction with Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, and 3) Miranda's work on the album, *The Hamilton Mixtape*. Parenthetical citations provide page numbers for quotations that are taken from Miranda and McCarter's book, while individual song titles are given for material from the two music albums.

regardless of who is cast. Notably, even when the play attempts to critique characters like Jefferson for enslavement, it does so in a fashion that ultimately centers white men, rather than enslaved people, and minimizes the experiences of enslavement for black women.

### **Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star: Actors and their Characters' Presence and Absence**

Miranda's casting choices for *Hamilton* give the impression of a diverse narrative where none exists. The presence of actors of color covers the absence of characters of color. In *Hamilton: The Revolution*, Lin-Manuel Miranda dedicates individual chapters to descriptions of how he recruited certain actors to perform in his musical due to their near perfect alignment to their portrayed characters. In an appropriately titled chapter, "On the Perfect Union of Actor and Role," Miranda elaborates on how Renee Elise Goldsberry amazed him with her natural ability to "think pretty fast" with a "whirring brain" like her character, Angelica Schuyler (Miranda and McCarter 78-79). This is only one of the many instances in which Miranda finds shared qualities between characters and their performers; others include Christopher Jackson and George Washington's innate strength and Leslie Odom, Jr. and Aaron Burr's cool elegance. Despite the shared qualities of actors and characters, University of Illinois theater professor, Dr. Jeffrey E. Jenkins, explains how it is still understood in theater that the actor and character are not equivalent. According to theater theory, "absence constructs presence" in that viewers recognize that the presence of a performer on stage is directly linked with the absence of the actual represented figure (Jenkins). For example, as Christopher Jackson claims the role of George Washington, there is an unspoken understanding that this substitute denotes the absence of the real person of Washington on stage (Jenkins).

This presence-absence theory follows Jacques Lacan's work that surrounds language and the signified chain. Lacan argues that language operates within a signifying chain, where one is never truly able to arrive at the underlying essence of a concept because of the perpetuation of signifiers relying on other signifiers. Through the continual chain of representation and use of metonymy and metaphors, the "function of speech is...that of 'disguising the thought'...of the subject" and "indicating the place of the subject in the search for the true" (Lacan 1176-1177). In other words, Lacan claims language can create a barrier to truly accessing reality, much as an actor's performance, regardless of how many shared qualities exist between the actor and her character, maintains a wall between appearances and reality.

Lacan's theory shows how the casting of *Hamilton* ultimately "disguises" the absence of women and people of color in the actual narrative; however, *Hamilton* further complicates theater's presence-absence theory in that the presence of actors of color enable an erasure of racial and gender tensions that were present during the Revolutionary era. Historian Annette Gordon-Reed argues that *Hamilton*'s casting ultimately allows its producers and viewers an easy pass when it comes to racial representation ("Blacks and the founding fathers"). Rather than celebrating the lives of black activists or generating conversation on the social and political issues of that time, the casting enables viewers to "celebrate without discomfort because black people are playing the men who have been, of late, subjected to much criticism," and this "excuses the failure to portray black historical figures" (Montiero). In supporting her case, Gordon-Reed notes the paradox of the black and Asian Schuyler sisters, who are "proclaiming how 'lucky' they were 'to be alive' during a time of African chattel slavery" or the irony in Christopher Jackson's stepping into the boots of George Washington, who not only owned slaves, but also created an underground tunnel system to enable the continued use of them once he moved to the slave-free North ("Blacks and the founding fathers").

Though Miranda incorporates minute acknowledgements of such slavery, including a reference to Jefferson and Hemings' relationship, which he calls his "Sally Hemings shout-out," this shout-out only serves as a manifestation of the presence-absence effect. The essence of a "shout-out" relates to moments of acknowledgement, often seen in the acceptance of an award or in allusions to another person within media, which is often fleeting and inconsequential. Miranda's language of the shout-out here enables him to give a brief concession to the historical background without delving into too many details—serving as polite acknowledgement without the obligation of opening an undesirable can of worms. Miranda offers his brief recognition of a heavy issue, and in giving a nod to it, he is excusing himself from initial criticism for his lack of elaboration. The shout-out functions in a similar manner as the color-affirmative casting in how the recognition is present, yet confrontation with race, gender, and enslavement are absent. The musical *Hamilton* has the potential to serve as a starting point for rich conversations from which people may "Rise up" and use history to aid in fighting today's oppression. To do so, however, one must strip away the initial glamour of the songs and dance to reveal the density of information covered in songs that not only highlight the Founding Fathers' positive attributes, but also minimize critical moments regarding slave, gender, and inequality.

The rest of this paper argues that each character serves a specific purpose in relation to Alexander Hamilton, but more importantly, in the narrative of slavery the show does not immediately foreground. In viewing the main characters of the play, one can see the different roles they serve for the plot and in terms of social messages delivered. Alexander Hamilton represents an upwardly mobile immigrant narrative from which the audience can draw inspiration, while Aaron Burr shows the harm in failing to form personal convictions. In relation to Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington function as foils with differing effects on the recognition and accountability of slave ownership in this period. While Washington aids in Hamilton's upward, political mobility by serving as a mentor figure, Jefferson's goal is "destroying Alexander Hamilton" (Miranda and McCarter 148). Despite the differences in their affiliations with Hamilton, Jefferson and Washington share multiple qualities including their roles as president (Washington being the first and Jefferson the third), origins in Virginia, and ownership of plantations and slaves; however, these commonalities, particularly regarding slave ownership, between the two are not equally represented in their on-stage depictions. By the end of this paper, I will demonstrate how the characters' language—especially what is unsaid—complicates one's understanding of American history and the idea of whose story is truly able to be told.

### **Jefferson Had a Little Lamb, Little Lamb, Little Lamb**

Jefferson's place as the singular antagonist due to slavery compared with Washington and Hamilton's elision contributes to the false revisions of American history that neglect confrontation with a past filled with strife. Throughout the show, Jefferson functions as the sole adversary to Hamilton concerning matters of abolition, which serves as Miranda's acknowledgement of slavery's presence in the Revolutionary era. At the same time, the purpose of this opposition is less about the issue itself—enslavement—and more about creating an adversary for Hamilton. While viewers rightly critique Jefferson for his slave holding, the critique focuses more on Hamilton's ability to one-up Jefferson during cabinet battles. This omission of slavery in the show means that audience members to be "neither challenged nor discomforted, and can leave the theater without having to confront any unpleasant truths" and also impacts the way viewers understand present racial tensions (Nichols). Hamilton's camaraderie with abolitionist John Laurens, by contrast, suggests that Hamilton is likewise active

in the anti-slavery movement; however, the show's depiction of many of the main characters' stances on slavery is historically inaccurate. Even though the respectable George Washington and Schuyler family owned multiple slaves while Hamilton participated directly in slave dealings, Thomas Jefferson's character is the only one in the play to truly receive criticism for his support of slavery. And yet, while *Hamilton* pays homage to the existence of Jefferson's slaves, its portrayal of Hemings and Jefferson's relationship creates a distortion of slave treatment between male owners and their female slaves. As Thomas Jefferson appears in the second act, subtle hints of his dealings with slaves, particularly his own slave, Sally Hemings, also become apparent.

The act opens with Jefferson's jazz-themed entrance as he is returning to America from France. Viewers also witness the flippancy with which Jefferson treats others. As Jefferson bounces nonchalantly across the stage, he gives the first nod to Sally Hemings as he sings, "Sally, be a lamb, darlin', won'tcha open it?" ("What'd I Miss?"). The way Jefferson addresses Hemings as "a lamb" and "darlin'" offers insight into his and other slave owners' mindsets, especially regarding female slaves ("What'd I Miss?"). Terms that Jefferson uses in relation to Hemings could initially be read as charming, playful banter, but based on the historical context of their relationship, they instead convey negative connotations associated with a condescending tone. According to the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, in relation to a person, the term "lamb" can be interpreted as a "term of endearment," but it also describes "One who is as meek...or weak as a lamb" and "A simpleton" ("lamb, n. 1"). Calling Sally a lamb highlights their relationship as potential lovers, but still is a master and slave relationship. The added layer of Hemings' female identity further complicates Jefferson's speech by exhibiting a misogynistic mindset in relationships that favors the patriarch. The word "darlin'" similarly juxtaposes their relationship in that it is used for "A person who is very dear to another" and "a lovable creature, a 'pet'" ("darling, n. 1 and adj."). This use of "darlin'" in which a pet-like quality further supports how Jefferson viewed Hemings as less than human in her servitude to him. Through the definitions given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "darling" can be equated to "a pet," while calling someone a "lamb" denotes the simplistic nature of actual lambs. Jefferson's use of these "pet names" demonstrates the complex nature of relationships between female slaves and their male owners, which is complicated further due to the intersection of gender and race during this period and how language can be used to negate one's humanity.

Further study into the personhood of Hemings beyond Miranda's fleeting "shout-out," raises deeper questions concerning who she was in relation to and as property of Thomas Jefferson (152). Jefferson inherited Hemings and her family upon the death of his father-in-law, thus making her his legal property (Gordon-Reed, "Sally Hemings, Thomas"). In addition to her position as slave, Jefferson also used Hemings to satisfy sexual desires, resulting in descendants with his genes (Gordon-Reed, "Sally Hemings, Thomas"). Many question the extent of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson's relationship by arguing whether to consider Hemings as a consenting "mistress" or forcefully seduced under the dominion of Jefferson (Danielle). Britni Danielle argues that viewing Hemings as a "mistress" to Jefferson implies that her engagements were consensual and allows for a whitewashing of history as opposed to an acknowledgement of her slave conditions. Danielle writes that Hemings's position as Jefferson's property means that Jefferson had the power to force himself upon her, and that phrasing this any other way diminishes the true master-slave relationship. On the other hand, Annette Gordon-Reed responds by writing that Hemings should be viewed as more than property, and as a conscientious person. Gordon-Reed claims that Hemings and other slaves "often acted to shape their circumstances to the extent that they could" ("Sally Hemings, Thomas"). Gordon-Reed notes how Hemings was with Jefferson in Paris, where she "had seen a different world, with different possibilities in it" ("Sally Hemings, Thomas"). Past the age of consent, Hemings was fully aware of the implications and possibilities of her engagements with Jefferson. Whether as a mistress, slave, or both, Sally Hemings is highly relevant to Thomas Jefferson's biography and this is only seen briefly in *Hamilton*, which can be interpreted as showing a more consensual Hemings that aligns with Annette Gordon-Reed's argument.

A song cut from the show's final set gives a second nod to Sally Hemings as Hamilton and Jefferson engage in a debate over the issue of slavery. In this song, Hamilton clearly lobbies against institutional slavery, while Jefferson, Madison, and Washington stand in its favor. Here, Hamilton articulates his rebuttal to Jefferson and passionately makes his point through a series of taunts. In this instance, the most poignant blow comes in mentioning the speculated relations between Jefferson and Hemings. Hamilton accuses Jefferson of having been "hee-hawing with Sally Hemings" ("Cabinet Battle #3"). The language used in this accusation, with its similarity to the "hee-haw" description of a donkey's braying, returns to the animalistic "pet names" given to Hemings in "What'd I Miss?" Such abrasive language creates a highly carnal view of the way in

which Jefferson used Hemings' body and sexuality, thus minimizing Hemings' personhood and adding more provocativeness to Hamilton's claim. However, in retaliation to Hamilton, Madison and Jefferson ask Hamilton if he is truly ready to "have that conversation" about adultery ("Cabinet Battle #3"). This question raised by Madison and Jefferson is an allusion to Hamilton's infidelity with Maria Reynolds, which promptly quiets Hamilton. The exchange between the three men creates a silent moral equivalency between Jefferson's actions and Hamilton's. Each man is aware that his actions would discredit him if known to the public, and each is aware of the hypocrisy to the expected Republican virtue. A call to young men to demonstrate qualities of leadership and good faith while building the nation encapsulates the ideal of Republican virtue, which is endangered by acts of unfaithfulness.

This exchange shows the need to consider the moment intersectionally, in terms of both race and gender. Although the men's infidelity troubles the national ideals, the intersection of race and gender for Sally Hemings creates an imbalance when she is equivocated to Maria Reynolds, thus serving an injustice to Hemings, a black female slave with different standards than Jefferson, Hamilton, and Reynolds. Although scholars speculate on the level of consent by Hemings, at the end of the day, Hemings is, indeed, a slave-property-to Thomas Jefferson. The language of the insult to Jefferson in "Cabinet Battle #3" hinges on the view of Hemings as a seductress, which holds unequal expectations of purity compared to those that surround Reynolds. At the same time, while all women in this era were called to adhere to the culture of true womanhood in their purity, the intersectionality of race and gender complicate this calling for African American female slaves. Hazel Carby writes that African American women were viewed to have a more "rampant sexuality" than white females, thus causing white male masters to be seduced by the female slave, "who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress" (27). This lens enables Jefferson to give a more severe rebuttal to Hamilton than Hamilton to Jefferson. While Hamilton's accusation has the power to discredit Jefferson's historical claims in *Notes on the State of Virginia* about the unattractiveness of black women, ultimately Hamilton's insult can be dismissed on the premise that Jefferson had no control because of Hemings' supposed overt sexuality. On the other hand, Hamilton's confession of his affair with Reynolds leads to his lost position in the cabinet, because he should be able to resist a (white) woman's advances.

*Hamilton's* approach to Jefferson is among a history of texts that have also critiqued Jefferson's hypocritical actions as a slave owner. William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), for instance, targets the instability and hypocrisy of relationships between white men and their subordinate African American slaves. This illustrates the imbalance between Reynolds and Hemings despite the scholarly debates that consider the extent of Sally Heming's relationship with Jefferson as consensual or lacking agency. The novel directly addresses the hypocrisy of Jefferson's ideals within the Declaration of Independence against the backdrop of his speculated sexual engagements with his female slaves and dismissal of his descendants by them. Although Jefferson would later speak against slavery in the Virginia legislature, many people struggle to reconcile this with Jefferson's actions as a slave owner and father of later slaves. Throughout the novel, Brown clearly works with the image of Jefferson as one, who "left his own children to die slaves" despite having "spoken high-sounding words in favour of freedom" (154-155). *Hamilton* echoes this image in its representation of Jefferson as an adulterer yet "a president of the United States; a man distinguished as the author of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the first statesmen of that country" (218). *Clotel* shows the discrepancies that many felt toward Jefferson in the same way that viewers are meant to view Jefferson in *Hamilton*, yet more complexities exist concerning gender roles, race, and intersectionality.

Brown's character, Clotel serves as a comparison to Sally Hemings, who may have imagined herself as loved by Jefferson, yet in reality lacked the right to stake this claim due to her identity as a black female slave. Clotel, navigates life as a mulatto slave, who is purchased endearingly by Horatio Green yet is later abandoned and sold when Green legally marries another. Green buys Clotel "to make her mistress of her own dwelling" in the hopes of "emancipation and freedom," yet Clotel would later learn that this union would never be legally recognized (Brown 61). In Clotel's experience, her purchase by and relationship with Green are a means to a hopeful end in freedom. This is a similar premise that some argue on behalf of Sally Hemings as a permissive mistress to Jefferson, yet as seen by Clotel's narrative, this still would not guarantee a "legal hold on Horatio's constancy" (Brown 80).

While Green claims to have loved Clotel more dearly than his legal wife, Green's legal, white wife still exerts more power over Clotel's final standings. Similarly, the stakes are unequal in the accusations about Hamilton and Reynolds compared to Jefferson and Hemings. While

Hamilton's affair with Reynolds could have detrimental impacts on his career, the mention of Jefferson's encounters with Hemings are merely insulting remarks. Understanding the forces of race and gender determining Sally Hemings choices (or lack of choices) disrupts any equivalencies made with Maria Reynolds; one may see the damage that is done by *Hamilton* in trying to put the two on the same plane. This issue derives from a temptation by many to consider only one dimension of a person's identity rather than how multiple sectors merge to create a complex subject. Unique and tricky situations are created through the navigation of multiple identities, and *Hamilton*'s attempt at equivocating Reynolds and Hemings negates this and erases of Hemings' experience as an African American woman and enslaved person.

### **Father Washington had Many Slaves, and Many Slaves had Father Washington**

As a political rival to Hamilton, Jefferson's slave ownership serves as another way in which the two differ, making Jefferson a natural target for criticism; however, the musical downplays Washington's equal role in the institution of slavery because of *Hamilton*'s need to preserve his image as not only aligning with Hamilton, but also as a reputable leader. While Jefferson was in France and introduced to the show in act two, George Washington was "first in war, first in peace, and first in Lin's imagination" (Miranda and McCarter 58). Miranda's representation of Washington follows a broad historical narrative that encapsulates his deeds as an honorable war hero, exemplary first president, and paternalistic leader, thus priming Washington to be a "friend, mentor, and father figure" to Hamilton (207). Miranda and McCarter devote several chapters of *Hamilton: The Revolution* to the Washington character and the qualities that made Broadway actor Christopher Jackson an ideal portrayer of this Founding Father. In describing Jackson, Miranda claims he had the ability to "project greatness, an aura of command" (58). As Jackson took command of the stage during his performances, George Washington appears taking command of the Continental Army as general and later the nation's capital as president. What is not present on stage includes Washington's command over his Mount Vernon plantation and the slaves who maintained it. This representation of Washington made him "a hard character to bust out of the marble shell in which history has encased him," according to Miranda, and caused an "inward struggle" for Jackson, who "tried to rationalize Washington's slaveholding" (120 and qtd. by Miranda and McCarter 208).

These more difficult aspects of Washington's career appear briefly in the musical, most prominently in Jackson's head bow during the final song as Eliza Schuyler reflects on more that could have been accomplished in Hamilton's lifetime. To many viewers, this head bow serves as reconciliation for Washington's defects. By offering viewers an image of Washington as regretful for his deeds as a slave master, viewers are not challenged to reconstruct their reverence for Washington that would consider his less desirable actions. This fleeting moment of staged shame allows audiences to preserve an unrealistic picture of Washington and is detrimental in the realization of the less virtuous aspects that were part of America's history. The overarching representation of George Washington in *Hamilton*, then, fortifies the idealistic view of him as a Republican, paternal leader to the nation, Hamilton, and indirectly, Washington's own slaves.

Washington's first appearance during "Right Hand Man" establishes both the public's view of him as an upright and paternal leader and his private concern about his self-image. Striding forward into a scene of frantic military activity, Lin-Manuel Miranda writes that he is "*heralded by soldiers*" (58). This stage direction shows the authority and respect that Washington's presence elicits among the troops. As Washington enters, the entire ensemble stands at attention, chanting an anticipated "Here comes the general," while Burr announces him with the same fervor as one who is introducing a celebrity ("Right Hand Man").

Miranda intentionally chose to introduce Washington in a time of frenzy, thus forcing his urgency to establish a right hand and Hamilton's need for a calming presence in his own life, as opposed to his impatience in stealing British cannons (58). As Washington looks to partner with Hamilton, viewers see how the familial relation begins to unfold as Washington sees himself in Hamilton, saying "I was just like you when I was younger," in a similar manner of a father to his son ("Right Hand Man"). In addition to being considered a father figure to Hamilton, Washington is also accredited to be the Father of the Nation, which Hamilton earlier describes as "young, scrappy, and hungry" ("My Shot"). As Washington's relationship with Hamilton is solidified through his adopting Hamilton as his aid and into the role of "Son" and mentee, Washington identifies with both, Hamilton and the emerging country, thus stepping into the role as father to Hamilton and the country's Founding Father. This relationship continues to unfold throughout the musical, contributing to the combined perspectives of Washington's leadership and enduring honor.

While many regard Washington as a highly renowned leader, he still shoulders the weight of the public's expectant eye, impacting his obsession with his appearance. Sociologist Dr. Erving Goffman, who specializes in microsociology, provides a framework for Washington's concern with his self-representation in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. According to Goffman's work, Washington, who bears the scrutiny of the nation, is compelled to "incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" through "a well-designed impression" for those who look up to him (6, 35). This plays out in the show as Washington only allows himself to "Let down [his] guard" for "just a millisecond" during a time of military uncertainty ("Right Hand Man"). This is a rare moment of transparency for Washington, who throughout the remainder of the show seeks to appear untouchable, as witnessed in a later confrontation with Hamilton, as Washington explicitly demands that he "is not a maiden in need of defending" ("Meet Me Inside"). As Goffman writes, in this instance Washington employs "defensive and protective practices...to safeguard [his] impression" (14).

Importantly, these defensive measures reappear in the second act during "Cabinet Battle #1" when Hamilton, in a moment of indignation, inadvertently associates Washington with Jefferson and fellow Southern slaveholders. Washington quickly silences Hamilton's faux pas and reprimands him by saying "watch your mouth" ("Cabinet Battle #1"). As a figure in the public eye, Washington understands the need to maintain an acceptable presence for the benefit of those who look to his leadership, but also for the continued balance of political power in the eyes of all – slaveholders and abolitionists.

Although the musical and history obsess with Washington's virtuous, public image, representations of his slaveholding role remain underdeveloped. Washington's lack of introspection and the show's creator's "shout-out" attitude concerning abolition are due, as Goffman writes, to how "If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards" (41). Washington becomes hyperaware of his public persona in moments when his character is questioned based on associations with other Southern slaves; however, this concern does not alter his actions in a way that would allow him to live with a free conscience, because the allure of slave labor is too enticing.

Historically, Washington's slaveholding was not completely discrete, as he personally posted advertisements for numerous escaped slaves in newspapers, yet the way history—through

paintings, plays, and now *Hamilton*—has chosen to remember Washington neglects this aspect of his character (Dunbar 99-111). In addition to Washington’s public advertisements for escaped slaves, he also had tunnels constructed to enable the passage of slaves between the President’s house and his office in Philadelphia and oversaw the transport of many slaves between the two places (66-74). While Washington’s slaveholding practices were widely known and unquestioned during the Revolutionary period, the elision of these details today illustrates a dependence by modern Americans on an incomplete image of Washington that only highlights desired qualities.

History’s remembrance of Washington has sought to memorialize his honorable deeds for the country and evade his slave dealings, which would tarnish the popular view of him as America’s exemplary leader and father. Junius Brutus Stearns’s 1851 painting, *Washington as a Farmer, at Mount Vernon*, depicts Washington as a plantation slave master at Mount Vernon as he delegates tasks to another. This image portrays Washington as a noble master through its use of smooth strokes, neutral colors, the slaves’ nonchalant postures, and Washington’s dignified stance. The setting of the painting on Mount Vernon shows an idyllic day with blue skies, wispy clouds, abundant fields, and the picturesque plantation house nestled in the background. A sense of calmness is generated through the stillness of the scene—the lack of blustery winds, amiability of the children, and moment of rest for the slaves. While the artistic technique required meticulous, individual brushstrokes to access the details, an overall feeling of unity surrounds the finish product—both as a painting and as a given impression of Washington’s relationship with his slaves.

Contrasting harsher circulating images of slave life, Stearns’s painting enables Washington to transfer his role as Father of the Nation to father of the home and slave, continuing to “suggest slavery was a benevolent and natural institution” (McInnis 89). Multiple staged plays continued this theme, showing black slaves who were proud to be working in the same country that Washington built (Jones 85-98). The encompassing trope for historical plays in the nineteenth century directs attention to the ideal of pastoral relations between slave owners and their slaves (Jones 86). This “idiom of racial paternalism” served to create “the state of domination as an ideal of care, familial obligation, gratitude, and humanity” (Hartman qtd. by Jones 86). Viewers who witnessed plays like *Kings Bridge Cottage*, *The Revolutionary Soldier*, and *The Patriot* were shown depictions of slaves who pledged themselves to Washington and

chattel slavery or extolled the symbolism of artwork of Washington (Jones 86, 97-98). Believing that these staged representations of life were true for all slaves in America, audience members could leave the theater optimistic about the experience of chattel slave life under the paternal leadership of owners like Washington. What this view neglects is the physical, mental, and emotional trauma that was commonly dealt to those in bondage (Jones 86).

Presently, *Hamilton*'s representation of Washington and race contributes to this pervasive cycle by drawing inspiration on Washington solely for his paternalistic image, ignoring the injustices also occurring. In *Hamilton*, Washington designates Alexander Hamilton to be his "right hand man" in both, war and politics ("Right Hand Man"). While Washington shamelessly calls upon the aid from Hamilton, the truthful matter of his favored slave, William "Billy" Lee, who served as Washington's literal right hand in everyday life, is ignored. This absence is also a theme *Hamilton* repeats from historical depictions of Washington. As literary critic Douglass A. Jones notes, John Trumbull's painting, *George Washington* (1780), depicts the slave Lee in detail from his turban to his facial expressions, whereas in Edward Savage's depiction of the *Washington Family* (1796), Lee "recedes into the background" with a face that is "listless and lacks particularity" (105). He lacks the visual individuation and honor despite the slave's presumed position in the "family" (106). Similar to Savage's art, *Hamilton* offers no distinguishing characters to fill the space of Washington's true right-hand man because acknowledging his work as a slaveholder would metaphorically remove Washington from his "pedestal" by generating acknowledgment of America's strife with slavery and racial issues and the Founding Father's failure to resolve matters then ("Right Hand Man"). In leaving a staging of *Hamilton*, viewers are encouraged to take active roles in revering their nation and those who created it, much like viewers of nineteenth-century plays. Yet, following a history of American plays and paintings that give slight recognition to the presence of slavery, *Hamilton* also continues its use of shout-outs to note moments of slavery while also minimizing its horrors.

In addition to overt character representation, the staging and costuming decisions are pivotal to how a story unfolds and is understood. The costuming choice by Miranda and costume designer Paul Tazewell further shows how *Hamilton* also makes issues of slavery indistinct. Due to the multiracial casting choices, the play would have needed to find more intentional ways to denote slaves and freemen, so in costuming the cast, Tazewell decided on "putting all of the actors in parchment-toned clothes, and adding colors only when they distinguished themselves as

specific characters” (Miranda and McCarter 116). The only direct allusion to the presence of an enslaved character comes in a Sally Hemings reference in act two, when ensemble dancer briefly swirls to Jefferson’s side; however, this fleeting moment is easily missed since the actress lacks distinction in her clothing and character. Likewise, the Continental Army, consisting of “Black and white soldiers,” played by the multiracial ensemble, would have been a comprised of free people and those who saw military service as a means for obtaining freedom, yet their individuality is lost in the blending of all participants and the erasure of the presence of free black men in the revolution (“Yorktown”). Through the indistinct representation of supporting characters in the historically mixed-race Continental army, there is no recognition of the black lives actively serving the nation, only the view of African Americans within slavery.

Although black soldiers were instrumental in the success of the Revolutionary War, even contributing the first martyrdom to Crispus Attucks, this does not ultimately guarantee their freedom, thus creating “an endless / Cycle of vengeance and death with no defendants” (“My Shot”). In the song “Right Hand Man,” the entirety of the represented Continental Army—including black and white soldiers—willingly submits to Washington’s leadership; however, contradictions arise when Washington sings in his farewell that “They’ll be safe in the nation we’ve made,”; when those protected in safety do not include the African American soldiers who equally worked to create an independent nation (“One Last Time”). *Hamilton* acknowledges how abolitionism was distant in Washington’s mind as he quickly disregards John Laurens’ question of freedom for “Black and white soldiers...alike” by replying with an abrupt “Not yet” (“Yorktown”). This response provides a brief glimpse into how Washington was unwilling to address the slave debate, to the extent that in the staged cabinet battles, Washington takes the role as the neutral moderator while Jefferson and Hamilton deliberate. The allusions to Washington’s Mount Vernon plantation are found throughout the show, and especially in his farewell song, “One Last Time,” to which he seeks to retreat to “a moment alone in the shade.” Yet, as the Jefferson-Hamilton debate in “Cabinet Battle #1” makes clear, and as Washington is quick to keep hidden in the play, this retreat is made possible due to the continued work of slaves.

According to actor Christopher Jackson, George Washington is “*the* great American icon,” which heightened the magnitude of the role for Jackson in the original productions (qtd. by Miranda and McCarter 58). Lin-Manuel Miranda’s description of Washington’s disposition as

“taller, older, quieter, more reserved, and more experienced” echoes the pervading views of Washington that had been developed throughout prior years of paintings and staged plays. While *Hamilton* does not function as justification for slavery in the Revolutionary era, as Jones writes about for many nineteenth-century plays, the 2015 production continues to immortalize the patriarchal leader of George Washington through the representation of him as a “friend, mentor, and father figure” to Hamilton and the young nation (207). By fixating on these positive attributes for Washington, *Hamilton* continues to frame its own John Trumbull-inspired image of Washington that blurs the reality of historical violence and the lives of enslaved people.

### **The S-L-A-V-E, Yes, That’s the Book for Me: The Use of the Slave Narrative**

While the Jefferson and Washington narratives handle slavery in varying degrees and for differing purposes, their stories of slave ownership—whether perceived as promiscuous or honorable—have nevertheless been referenced throughout literature, art, and theater. On the other hand, Hamilton’s narrative, which sets him up as a “prototype for millions” of later immigrants is one that “America forgot” (“Alexander Hamilton”). *Hamilton* resurrects the legacy of an aspirational immigrant whose account mirrors the traditions of slave narratives, but whose whiteness and freedom reveal the strengths and limitations in the power of writing.

An underlying theme for Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical is its focus on the shaping of history and one’s legacy. In his last moments on stage, Alexander Hamilton asks, “What is a legacy? It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see” (“The World Was Wide Enough”). Following Hamilton’s exit, the musical returns to George Washington’s leitmotif of “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story” in its namesake closing song, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story,” which “drives home the importance of the creation of historical narratives” (Miranda and McCarter 120; Montiero 91). In writing this line, Miranda knew that “it would be the key to the whole musical” because “It’s the fundamental truth all our characters (and all of us) share” (Miranda and McCarter 120). In enacting this “fundamental truth” that Miranda claims, *Hamilton* is telling a progress narrative of immigration and the realization of the American Dream; however, in its condensation of the people and events of the Revolutionary era, *Hamilton* ignores the “inconvenient fact” of slavery, racial prejudice, and those who upheld the system of inequality, including the Founding Fathers (Nichols).

Miranda's focus on celebrating Alexander Hamilton's legacy relies on the view of Hamilton as a testament to an upward immigrant narrative—a narrative that has become especially compelling in contemporary politics. In the creation of *Hamilton*, Miranda acknowledges the impact of immigration on Alexander Hamilton, President Barack Obama, and “the first of the founding fathers of hip-hop,” DJ Kool Herc (Miranda and McCarter 15). Miranda pays special tribute to his father, Luis A. Miranda, Jr., who traveled to the United States in 1973 from the Caribbean (15). As a first-generation immigrant, Lin-Manuel Miranda directly witnessed how America opened new opportunities to him through the bravery of his father, who journeyed “from Puerto Rico, learned English, started a family, and, one night in 2009, watched his son receive a standing ovation from the president” (15). Miranda identifies with Hamilton, who was called an “immigrant striver,” while Miranda is a self-proclaimed “outer-borough striver” in New York (38). Both men are described as “hard-working, ambitious, desperate to prove [themselves]” (38). This personal connection provided insight that allowed Miranda to relate to the challenges of being considered an outsider and the need to provide recognition to those who break the institutional barriers to success.

Surrounding the 2015 release of *Hamilton* on Broadway, the political climate was fraught with concerns about foreign policy and immigration. 2015 experienced surges of migration as displaced people sought asylum from political terror, religious unrest, and natural disasters (“Top 10 Migration”). As legislation was being debated and restricted while racial and social turmoil resounded, *Hamilton* offered an optimistic view of the “American Dream” journey that many continue to cling to while living in the United States.

Through a dialogue based on ambition and an emphasis on pulling oneself up from the bootstraps, *Hamilton* creates an “idealized” space for Americans, “where people of many races and backgrounds dance together” in unity (Miranda and McCarter 40). Miranda's word “idealized” perfectly denotes how this aspiration has yet to be achieved, and due to the multiracial casting, Miranda and viewers fail to recognize how Alexander Hamilton's privilege evokes assistance from others in ways that are unequal to his African American counterparts in this period.

In telling an influential narrative on the power of writing and independence, *Hamilton* mirrors many tropes from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition, which not only offers glimpses of success but also shows their limitations. Shared traits

between Miranda's *Hamilton* and works like Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* include the prominence of literacy and authorship and images of a self-made man. While *Hamilton* uses these themes to tell a story of personal, American triumph, the stakes are higher for black writers, who see authorship as a means to altering unjust circumstances and restoring their stolen humanity.

For both, Hamilton and Equiano, the acquisition of literacy is the catalyst that propels them onward. In the first act of *Hamilton*, the “young, scrappy, and hungry” protagonist seeks an “accelerated course of study” to supplement him as he yearns for glory (“My Shot”, “Aaron Burr, Sir”). Hamilton's life is permeated with losses followed by success, including his displacement as an orphan, his comrade's struggle in battle, and his wooing of and infidelity to wife, Elizabeth Schuyler. In these moments, Hamilton achieves personal victory through his cunning and charisma. Had Hamilton not acted even at a young age, Miranda writes that “He woulda been dead or destitute without a cent or restitution” (“Alexander Hamilton”). The opening number, “Alexander Hamilton,” paints a picture of the hardships previously endured by young Hamilton—his father's abandonment, his mother's death, and a devastating hurricane near the Caribbean island of St. Croix—followed by his redemption “By working a lot harder. By being a lot smarter. By being a self-starter.” Hamilton's writing on the ruin of the hurricane catalyzes people to collect an offering to bring him to the United States. Similarly, Hamilton's urging to Congress during “Right Hand Man” generates the motivation needed by the Continental Army to “Rise up” in a frantic time. In his private sphere, Hamilton's love letters cause Elizabeth Schuyler to fall helplessly in love, as he “built [her] palaces out of paragraphs” (“Burn”). In these instances, Hamilton harnesses the power of language as he claims to “write [his] way out” (“Hurricane”), and this self-determination resonates with audience members, encouraging them to leave the theater, thinking, “I want to have *that* kind of ambition”—to be able to pick oneself up from despair and construct a brighter future (Miranda and McCarter 257).

While Hamilton focuses on increasing his education for his social and political mobility, enslaved Africans sought to use their knowledge “to challenge the subhuman status assigned to Africans by...pseudo-scientific arguments” (Gunn 2). To justify racialized slavery, Europeans spread the belief in the placement of each race within a spectrum of humanness that denoted superiority over those races considered less human. A key proponent for this practice was

Thomas Jefferson, who spoke on the “gradations of all races of animals” and the “unfortunate difference of colour” as a “powerful obstacle to the emancipation” of African slaves (153-154). As noted earlier, Jefferson’s language in *Hamilton* denotes his view of his slave, Sally Hemings, as less than human through the beckoned pet names.

The Revolutionary era saw many people utilizing written communication to propel movements and exhort beliefs. While people were responding to each other through newspaper articles and pamphlets concerning issues of political freedom, enslaved people capitalized on this technology by learning the language and skills necessary to address issues of slavery. They wrote in response to the ideology circulating among slave masters and civilians, even writing directly to political figures as seen by poet Phillis Wheatley’s letter and poem addressed to General George Washington (not mentioned in the musical) (“His Excellency General Washington”). Aware of the structures of discrimination in which they found themselves, she and Equiano used their acquired literacy to challenge those claims by equalizing themselves with white freemen and articulating arguments against slavery (Gunn 2). In doing so, they created a space for their voices to be heard (3). Despite the work accomplished by black writers alongside figures like Hamilton, the question of “who tells your story” shows how not all voices are heard (“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”). Hamilton gains wealth and political power through his ability to “write like you’re running out of time,” yet the black authors who wrote “like [they] need it to survive” continued to see the injustices of slavery for nearly a century longer (“Non-Stop”).

Despite playing off the themes of slave narratives, *Hamilton* overlooks the institution of slavery in how its continuation contributes to Hamilton’s success. Hamilton is admired for his initiative throughout his life, yet many factors contribute to his success including the help and guidance of others and the unspoken agreement to continue slavery as a compromise for Hamilton’s advantage. In these moments, viewers see how slavery aids the privileged and is perpetuated for the gain of others. “By fourteen,” Hamilton is working within the Atlantic slave trade while “in charge of a trading charter” in the Caribbean (“Alexander Hamilton”). Through his occupation, Hamilton witnesses and participates in the trafficking of millions of slaves, including the violence of them “being slaughtered and carted / Away across the waves” (“Alexander Hamilton”). The funds that are later collected for Hamilton’s journey to the United States are gathered from the profits of the work of slaves, thus showing how Hamilton’s escape

is due in part to the business that Miranda wants to leave out of his narrative. Later, as Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton bargains with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, resulting in Hamilton's "unprecedented financial power / A system he can shape however he wants" and Jefferson's desire for the capital nearer to the South ("The Room Where It Happens"). While this agreement seems to benefit both parties, the forgotten group of African slaves are at the mercy of these men, making them the "pieces that are sacrificed" ("The Room Where It Happens"). In the song "The Room Where It Happens," Madison suggests this compromise, claiming it benefits Jefferson by allowing him to "work a little closer to home." The implications of this agreement led to the creation of underground tunnels between southern plantations and the White House, thus enabling the Founding Fathers' continued use of slavery. While the song draws viewers' attention to the assumed gain by Hamilton and the failure of Burr to be proactive in his desires, it elides the way in which Hamilton's agreement ensures easier slave practices for others. While "*Hamilton* reminds us that the American Revolution was a writers' revolution, that the founders created the nation one paragraph at a time," one must consider the additional support that went into the construction and framing of the nation and the way those stories have been written over (Miranda and McCarter 225).

### **Do-Re-Mi and We Out**

As addressed throughout this paper, each character's role in relation to Hamilton and enslavement varies depending on the image that Miranda needs to further his plot or instill in viewers' memories. In this way, *Hamilton* memorializes an idealized view of the Founding Fathers and Revolutionary era as one that the audience should learn from based on the ambition and perseverance of its namesake character, Alexander Hamilton. Miranda's show creates a usable history for viewers, just as Frederick Douglass urges people to "do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future" in his oration "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (*TeachingAmericanHistory.org*). Yet in doing so, *Hamilton* paints a skewed picture of the Revolutionary era and its leaders as "in a line, looking all humble / Patiently waiting to sign a declaration and start a nation" ("No John Trumbull"). In reality, the lives and motives of each character are complex webs of desire that result in a "reality that is not a pretty picture" and definitely challenge the John Trumbull view of the period ("No John Trumbull"). As uncovered in this paper, the initial buzz surrounding *Hamilton*'s multiracial casting and

spectacular lyrics fail to reconcile the retelling of a white-washed American history. Miranda wrote that the opening chords of the musical were meant to imitate a swinging door sound effect through the drawn out notes on the violin. While those chords open the door to the Broadway hit, *Hamilton*, this paper has sought to similarly open a door of proliferation and insight into the Grammy-winning musical and its catchy lyrics.

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