

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In the central research project for the WR 150 seminar “Interrogating Race in Contemporary America,” students were asked to make an argument about the ways in which one or more representations contribute to our understanding of the cultural meanings of race in America today. In this essay, Kylie takes as her main exhibit source *Hamilton*, possibly the most popular cultural artifact of recent years, and interrogates the praise that critics have heaped upon the musical. Kylie’s argument is well-developed, with a clear articulation of Swales’s three research moves (establish the territory, establish a niche, occupy the niche), and relies on an impressive range of sources. I particularly appreciate Kylie’s attentiveness to what readers may need to follow her argument: in providing sufficient context and clear transitions (both within and across paragraphs), she demonstrates how clarity and coherence depend upon moving from old to new information. Kylie’s essay is also a valuable model for future students who wish to include an abstract, keywords, visuals, or usage notes.

Jessica Bozek
WR 150: Interrogating Race in Contemporary America

FROM THE WRITER

Throughout my academic career, I have learned the most from having my own beliefs challenged by others. In this paper, I decided to challenge those beliefs myself. In “Interrogating Race in Contemporary America,” I was able to put words to my once-disorganized thoughts on identity politics through class discussions and various reading assignments, specifically on the idea of a “post-racial America.” Though I immediately knew that I wanted to write about post-racial beliefs in my research paper, I had difficulty thinking of a main exhibit to analyze. After racking my brain for hours, I had the sudden realization to write about *Hamilton: An American Musical*. As a huge *Hamilton* fan and supporter of its political impact, I truly enjoyed analyzing and connecting such a passion of mine to a fascinating sociological concept. I encourage everyone to write about their passions, remain objective and honest, and to not be afraid to question anything and everything.

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ALL HAMMED UP: HOW *HAMILTON: AN AMERICAN MUSICAL* ADDRESSES POST-RACIAL BELIEFS

Abstract: *Hamilton: An American Musical*, the Broadway sensation that chronicles the life of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, has received critical acclaim for its comprehensive plotline as well as its predominantly African-American and Latino cast, a deliberate choice made by the show's composer and lyricist, Lin-Manuel Miranda. Both the show itself and the cast of *Hamilton* evolved into a political statement of equality, unity, and an alleged indicator of a post-racial society. However, American society is far from post-racial, and most literature on *Hamilton* does not acknowledge the faults of *Hamilton*, specifically the public's perception of the show's content and casting. Though the racial representation in the *Hamilton* cast is positive and worthy of critical praise, my research will analyze the racial disparities within the casting of the musical and the story within the show itself to understand and disprove the belief that *Hamilton* signifies a post-racial society. I will examine reviews and current scholarship on *Hamilton* to explore public perception of the musical to further understand how representation of minorities in art benefit marginalized populations more broadly in America as well as develop a façade of overcoming racial barriers.

Keywords: Non-white casting, post-racial society, racial representations, diversity, minorities in art

On August 6, 2015, *Hamilton: An American Musical*, which tells the life story of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, premiered on Broadway at the Richard Rodgers Theatre. Theater critics, journalists, and civilians alike held a practically unanimous opinion about *Hamilton*: that it is one of the best pieces of musical theater in this generation. It was praised not only for its well-crafted songs, relevant political rhymes, and unprecedented artistry, but also for its intentional non-white casting. Most of the actors in *Hamilton* are African-American, Hispanic, and Latinx, causing the actors in the musical and the musical itself to receive lots of media attention. This praise influenced many journalists and reviewers to make broader claims about the current state of American society. *Hamilton* sparked a national dialogue about race in America. Its positive representation of minority actors led many to believe *Hamilton* marked the end of a whitewashed American media, supporting the post-racial¹ narrative that many attribute to President Barack Obama's election and re-election. *Hamilton* has even been called a sign of the "twilight of white America" (Walsh 457). Despite these claims, the myth of a post-racial America is exactly that: a myth, which current scholarship about *Hamilton* fails to address. Through analysis of reviews, existing literature about *Hamilton*, and music from the show itself, I will disprove the claim that *Hamilton* indicates that American society is post-racial. Overall, I will analyze *Hamilton: An American Musical* and current scholarship about the production to provide insight into why Americans continue to pursue the post-racial narrative, the internal and external effects that representations of minorities in art can have on larger political conversations, and the importance of inspiring the "Hamiltons" of tomorrow in American media today.

The era of President Obama did generate larger, unprecedented opportunities for racial representation in American media. Television shows like *Black-ish*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Empire*, and *Jane the Virgin* emerged during Obama's presidency, all appearing on major networks. This kind of representation is fairly new in America, especially with its history of mainly showcasing white talent in film, television, theater, and other media. Author and playwright Warren Hoffman found that classic Broadway musicals like *42nd Street* and *The Music Man* exemplify white history and privilege in America (5). There are also musicals like *Anything Goes* that have racist elements in their plotlines. For many Americans, this pattern remained until recently. Broadway has been dubbed "The Great White Way," and though the term's genesis had nothing to do with race, scholars have given it a second meaning, as Broadway was largely considered an activity for the wealthier sector of American society because of its high price point. Due to systemic socioeconomic restraints, that second meaning inherently labels Broadway as a white pastime, as only the most affluent in society can afford to enjoy the expensive world of theatre. In the United States, the opportunities to reach that level of wealth are mainly afforded to white people, both directly and indirectly. Though this trend has historic roots, it also continues today. The Broadway League found that 77% of all tickets sold in the 2015–2016 season—of which *Hamilton* is a part—were purchased by Caucasians ("The Demographics").

Though Caucasians continue to comprise most of the Broadway audience, Broadway and American media at large have increased minority representation onstage. The 2015–2016 Broadway season boasted more minorities than seasons past (Lee and Rooney). *On Your Feet!* shows the life of Latina singer Gloria Estefan, while *Allegiance* casted a significant number of Asian-Americans with an all Asian-American crew. These musicals, alongside *Hamilton*, made many, including associate professor of theater at Tufts University Monica White Ndounou, claim the 2015–2016 season the "most diverse yet." Before this season, musicals like *Dreamgirls* and *The Color Purple* made waves on Broadway as well. Deviating greatly from the white stories of musicals past, both musicals revolve around African-Americans telling the stories of other African-Americans, which is where *Hamilton* strays from the pack.



Figure 1: Original Broadway Cast of *Hamilton*

The musical's creator and writer, Lin-Manuel Miranda, who also played the title role in the original Broadway cast, calls *Hamilton* "the story of America then, told by America now" (Paulson). Miranda wrote the roles to be played by non-white actors specifically, so in *Hamilton*, non-white

actors are playing white characters. In the original cast, Leslie Odom, Jr., Daveed Diggs, and Christopher Jackson are all African-American actors who played Aaron Burr, the Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington, respectively. Philippa Soo, an Asian-American woman, starred as Hamilton's wife, Elizabeth "Eliza" Schuyler Hamilton, while Anthony Ramos originated the roles of John Laurens and Phillip Hamilton alongside Miranda as Alexander Hamilton; both Ramos and Miranda are of Puerto-Rican descent (*Hamilton*). These roles translated to *Hamilton's* other adaptations, as its current Broadway cast and casts in its Chicago, London's West End, and national touring productions have adhered to the non-white casting method. When questioned about this method, Jeffrey Seller, one of the producers of *Hamilton*, stated that despite public backlash after a *Hamilton* casting call sought "non-white performers," producers will "continue to cast the show with the same multicultural diversity² that [they] have employed thus far" (Viagas).

These representations of minorities contribute to the overwhelming support *Hamilton* has garnered. Diggs stated it is important for him and many others to see people of color taking part in a typically all-white historical narrative through the show's main musical styling, rap, or "the voice of the people of [his] generation, and of people of color" (Mead). As an African-American himself, Diggs provides insight into the significance these representations have in the lives of racial minorities. From his statements, I derive that seeing people of color claiming and identifying with a story they have long been excluded from is important, and makes history an inclusive narrative all people can be a part of. I argue that the actual history that is told, however, is also significant, and can impact how people of color perceive the message of that historical narrative, which, in this case, is the story within *Hamilton*.

Though *Hamilton's* insistence in casting non-white actors is admirable, the show itself does have some problematic elements. I have found that in *Hamilton's* retelling of American history, the musical adheres to the typical whitewashed history many Americans are familiar with. Though most of the actors in *Hamilton* are people of color, all of the characters portrayed in the musical are white; there are no people of color featured as characters. I believe this deficit is only underscored by Hamilton's privileges as a white man. Miranda, in the documentary *Hamilton's America*, stated that Hamilton is able to "write his way out of his circumstances." Hamilton literally says this in the song "Hurricane," where he describes writing a letter about the hurricane that devastated his hometown in the Caribbean, and how his letter inspired community members to raise money for him to leave and get an education in the North American colonies. He reflects on writing for George Washington during the Revolution, crafting love letters to his future wife Eliza, and writing the Federalist Papers and various pieces of legislation outlining his plans for the American financial and banking systems.

Though Hamilton was a gifted writer, I maintain that his ability to "write his way out" also came with a fair amount of both privilege and luck. Many people, both in Hamilton's time and today, are not afforded the privileges that come with quickly being recognized for their talents. This is not to undermine Hamilton's hard work, determination, and subsequent success. But I argue that Hamilton still benefitted from the system of white privilege that existed in the late 1700s and persists today. Racial, socioeconomic, and other political and cultural factors can prevent someone just as talented, if not more talented, than Hamilton from becoming successful in many professional industries, including politics. This reality is well-known for people of color, who face obstacles in personal, professional, and political spheres. The endurance and withstanding of these barriers over time clearly go against the post-racial belief that barriers no longer exist for people of color.

But the differences between the livelihoods of white people and people of color go beyond Hamilton's white privilege. One of the most prominent issues that *Hamilton* fails to address is slavery. Hamilton is portrayed as a staunch abolitionist throughout the show, which is not completely accurate. I found this portrayal evident when Hamilton criticizes Thomas Jefferson in the song "Cabinet Battle #1," a cabinet meeting rearranged into a rap battle, in which Hamilton and Jefferson debate Hamilton's proposal to allow the federal government to assume state's debts. Hamilton criticizes him: "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' / Then keep ranting, we know who's really doing the planting" (Miranda). University of Richmond professor Patricia Herrera analyzed another example of this portrayal in the song "Stay Alive," when John Laurens describes his new role in the American Revolution: "I stay at work with Hamilton / We write essays against slavery / And every day's a test of our camaraderie and bravery" (Miranda). These lyrics paint Hamilton as an aggressive opponent of slavery, though in reality, this was not the case (Herrera). Despite the confusion and misinterpretation of his political and personal relationships with slavery, I found that Hamilton's personal records indicate he did purchase, own, and trade slaves (Hamilton 268). Though he did work closely with John Laurens, who supported enlisting and freeing black soldiers during the Revolution, Hamilton's motivations to support abolition were overshadowed by his own desire to climb the social ladder, according to Professor Michelle DuRoss from the University at Albany ("Somewhere in Between"). She contests that Hamilton's desperation to enter the upper tier of American society was accomplished by marrying into the wealthy, slaveholding Schuyler family, causing him to overlook his own public stance on slavery as to assimilate into the opulent slaveholding world he was so desperate to join.

Both Hamilton and Aaron Burr—Hamilton's fellow politician and main antagonist—gloss over slavery in the show, erasing the significance of the existence of slaves during their time. In "The Room Where It Happens," Burr expresses his anger and desire to be in the "big old room" of important political decision-making, specifically the room where Jefferson, James Madison, and Hamilton decide the locations of the United States Capitol and the country's main financial center. Burr, played by Leslie Odom Jr., says that besides the "two Virginians and the immigrant," "[n]o one else was in the room where it happened." Lyra Monteiro found that this statement erases the role of slaves in the lives of these men, as there undoubtedly would be slaves serving and preparing the dinner that occurred in "The Room Where It Happens," hosted by Jefferson, who claims he "arranged the menu, the venue, the seating" (94). The character's dialogue on slavery—or lack thereof—removes slaves and slavery from the historical narrative presented in the musical. The absence of slave characters in *Hamilton* once again excludes people of color from this narrative, reinforcing the Anglo-centric history often taught in classrooms across the United States. The lack of characters of color in *Hamilton* perpetuates the idea that people of color do not have stories to be told, or rather, there was no place in American history for people of color then, and there is no place for people of color in America now.

Despite not mentioning slavery, *Hamilton* does often mention Hamilton's status as an immigrant, which empowers immigrants exposed to *Hamilton* in a political climate routinely hostile towards them. Born in Saint Kitts in the West Indies, Hamilton immigrated to the United States seeking an education. Miranda, hailing from an immigrant family himself, emphasized this part of Hamilton's identity, calling *Hamilton* the "quintessential immigrant story" ("Hamilton's America") about "having to work twice as hard to get half as far" (Ball and Reed). One of the standout lines in the show comes during the song "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)," when the Marquis

de Lafayette and Hamilton reflect on their accomplishments, stating “Immigrants / We get the job done” (Miranda). Frank Lechner, a professor of sociology at Emory University, found that *Hamilton* tells a comprehensive immigrant success story that says even immigrants can achieve the American Dream (123), combatting current inflammatory rhetoric against immigrants and Latinos around the country.

Miranda’s telling of Hamilton’s immigrant story creates a powerful, layered representation for Latinos, which has positive effects. In her review of *Hamilton*, Ariana Quiñónez described the significance of seeing a Latino man playing an immigrant on Broadway. For the first time, she saw herself in a Broadway musical and related to American history in a way that many minorities did not until *Hamilton* (“The cultural significance”). Patricia Herrera also examined the importance of this representation and its effects on her Hispanic and Latinx students. One of her students said that as an African and Hispanic-American, watching *Hamilton* and Miranda’s first musical, *In the Heights*—the story of a Hispanic storeowner, Usnavi, and his life in one of the predominantly Latinx neighborhoods of Manhattan, Washington Heights—was particularly important to them and their family because that was the first time they ever saw themselves represented on stage (“*Hamilton*, Democracy”). Positive responses like these lead many to believe the post-racial myth. However, the amount of white representation versus representation of people of color is disproportionate.

Hamilton’s representations of people of color have turned the musical into a powerful political statement that reached beyond Broadway. The most prominent incident that faced the musical occurred when Vice President Mike Pence attended a performance of *Hamilton*. Actor Brandon Victor Dixon, who played Aaron Burr that night, read a statement from the cast addressed to Pence, stating the cast of *Hamilton* is the “diverse America” that is nervous and apprehensive about Donald Trump’s administration (Healey and Mele). Though many supported the cast for making a statement in the wake of President Trump’s election, many Trump supporters—and even Trump himself—expressed disdain toward this act on social media. The cast’s statement emphasized their fears as people of color, which ultimately faced public backlash. In a post-racial society, the anxiety expressed by the cast of *Hamilton* would not exist to begin with, let alone be subjected to racist public criticism.

This backlash is reflective of Broadway now, as the theater will not remain the “diverse America” it was in 2015 and 2016. The next two years on Broadway will make way for “more shows slated to have very white casts, including *Titanic* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Miranda himself called the diversity in the 2015–2016 Broadway season an “accident of timing” (Seymour). Broadway will remain “The Great White Way,” at least for now, despite the success people of color had along the Way. Though 2016 seemed like a success for minorities in the entertainment industry, there was not a significant change in minority representation and recognition in media compared to past years. Over 95% of all nominees in Tony Awards history are white, only slightly behind the percentage of all Oscar nominees (Seymour). There are only a handful of new television programs, films, and musicals that employ a significant amount of minority talent. Just because there is some representation for minorities in media does not mean that racial barriers have suddenly dissolved—they are just changing and being interrogated more than years past.

Clearly *Hamilton* and the buzz it created stood out from other works of visual art in the media, and the exceptionalism and sensationalism that comes with minorities in art translates to American media as a whole. Often times, art created by or featuring a significant number of

minorities—whether it be through film, theatre, paintings, or other forms of visual media—becomes inherently “othered”³ by media at large. Once a merited piece of art, like Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*, is labeled as “diverse” or “groundbreaking for minorities,” that piece is often praised heavily for that label alone. French philosopher Michel Foucault theorizes that any label exclusively used to describe something that deviates from a social norm immediately enters this category of “other” (41). Foucault’s theory clearly explains why *Hamilton* has become a post-racial paragon in American media culture today.

Art created by minorities is often labeled as such. Essayist Erica Hunt asserts that most people have never identified a piece of art by the artist’s race if the artist is white, but that reality is much different for non-white artists (171). Miranda, a Puerto-Rican man, created *Hamilton* as a piece of art meant to showcase the racial diversity he grew up with from his own personal experience as a Latino. Therefore, Miranda, his fellow non-white performers, and the show itself fit what the media labels “diverse.” *Hamilton*’s “otherness” means that *Hamilton* cannot stand without its status as a “diverse” show. Though that label is not necessarily malicious or bad, that label proves why *Hamilton* is not indicative of an American post-racial society. In a post-racial society, such a label would not exist. The “diversity” praised today would be considered normal, not “other.” In theory, a post-racial society would not acknowledge “diversity” at all, as the “diversity” label would not be necessary.

Overall, the discrepancies between *Hamilton*’s unparalleled achievements as a positive, inclusive racial representation and its problematic regurgitation of whitewashed American history shed light on the importance of diversity on Broadway and in American media as a whole. The musical exemplifies the importance of racial representation for people of color who often find themselves excluded from historical narratives. But the disparities and issues within both the content and casting of the musical, as well as the public’s perception of it, defy beliefs that *Hamilton* is the paragon of post-racial achievement. Despite its accolades and success, much of which is well deserved, to say that *Hamilton* symbolizes the United States’ alleged overcoming of racial tension is undoubtedly false. Statements about *Hamilton*’s reflection of a post-racial America diminish the experiences, injustices, and systemic issues that people of color continue to face today. Beyond feeding into the post-racial myth, *Hamilton* is an example of how more “Hamiltons” should exist, and that the stories of people of color deserve to be told just as much as the stories of America’s Founding Fathers. The history of all people must be shared if the United States ever wants to achieve the post-racial society many have dreamt of, and though *Hamilton* is a historic stepping-stone on that journey, the end goal has yet to be achieved.

NOTES

1. Throughout this paper, I will be using the term “post-racial” consistently as part of the backbone of my main argument. “Post-racial” is defined as “[d]enoting or relating to a period in or society in which racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist” by the Oxford English Dictionary (“Post-racial”). The general conclusion about the origins of the post-racial narrative in America is attributed to the election of President Barack Obama as the first African-American president. Because Obama’s election was conclusively historic, many interpreted his election as an overcoming of racial tensions and barriers, that because a black man was elected to the highest office in the country, race is no longer an issue preventing people of color from becoming successful. However, many political, social, economic, and cultural factors counter this belief, including facets of the current American media landscape.
2. The term “diversity” is often used throughout this paper, sometimes within quotation marks and sometimes not. I use the word “diversity” in its typical definition in regards to race, meaning a mix of multiple races. When I use the word “diversity” in quotations, however, that signals the idea of diversity conjured by the media, essentially meaning non-white. “Diversity” in quotation marks also implies a negative connotation, because I find the media’s definition of diversity often misused as a way to make people, companies, or other entities seem progressive or inclusive, when in actuality, using the word “diversity” creates a façade that goes against those perceptions.
3. The use of the word “other” as a verb means to stray away from what is normal. When something has been “othered” by society, that concept or item or belief is presented as something abnormal or unusual, for better or for worse.

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