

**Donatella Galella**

**BEING IN “THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENS”: *HAMILTON*,  
OBAMA, AND NATIONALIST NEOLIBERAL  
MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION**

In the spring of 2016, Utah adopted a resolution that read in part:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislature of the state of Utah, the Governor concurring therein, are not “throwin’ away [our] shot” to express our gratitude to Lin-Manuel Miranda, sir, and recognize that Utah, America, and the world “has its eyes on you” for your exemplary contributions to the arts and education by “placing [us all] in the narrative” of our rich American history with “Hamilton,” the man and the musical.<sup>1</sup>

The two white male cosponsors, a Democrat and a Republican, dressed as King George and Hamilton, respectively, as they rapped the resolution in the state senate. In *Hamilton*, chief creator Lin-Manuel Miranda stakes out space for an immigrant from the Caribbean who was in the room where the United States of America was founded. Based on Ron Chernow’s biography, *Hamilton* follows the struggles and successes of Alexander Hamilton in a story largely told by his nemesis, Aaron Burr.<sup>2</sup> The musical opened Off-Broadway at the Public Theater in 2015 and subsequently moved to Broadway. With its Founders Chic historical approach, hip-hop aesthetic, and multiracial cast, this Broadway blockbuster has

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My thanks to the following people for providing feedback and spaces for me to pontificate on *Hamilton*: Trevor Boffone, Michelle Liu Carriger, Marci McMahan, James McMaster, Liz Przybylski, Bhargav Rani, Stephen Sohn, Mary Ann Smart and the UC Berkeley On the Same Page team, and the staff and reviewers of *Theatre Survey*. I dedicate this essay to David Savran.

earned substantial commercial and critical acclaim from across the political spectrum. Former President Barack Obama joked, “*Hamilton*, I’m pretty sure, is the only thing Dick Cheney and I agree on.”<sup>3</sup>

How did this musical bring together opposing political parties?<sup>4</sup> This article assesses the work that *Hamilton* performed in the context of the age of Obama.<sup>5</sup> His tenure in office from 2009 to 2016 approximates the period when Miranda developed and debuted the musical. *Hamilton*, at its premiere, appealed to both Obama and Cheney, Democrats and Republicans, because the musical upholds what this essay calls “nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion.” In other words, Miranda and the musical occupy a centrist position that mobilizes performers of color and the myth of meritocracy in order to extol and envision the United States as a multiracial utopia where everyone has a fair chance to compete for access to “The Room Where It Happens,” as the title of Aaron Burr’s show-stopping number has it. In the Obama era, people of color took center stage when they paradoxically adopted the roles of “great” white men and downplayed the salience of race and racism. They celebrated entrepreneurialism and embodied the exceptional. And then their exceptionalism became proof of the American Dream—how barriers could be overcome, how racial difference no longer mattered. Both *Hamilton* and Obama largely adhered to rather than challenged this view of the status quo. They modeled a dematerialized approach to social progress that emphasized hard work, extraordinariness, and patriotism rather than grappling with the uneven ground on which people stand. The politics expressed in the discourse surrounding the show, its casting, and the hard-work-equals-success through line of the musical itself demonstrate the terms and limits of inclusion to the room where it happens, as they deliberately keep deep engagement with slavery and settler colonialism outside of the room, the narrative, and the nation. This article’s conclusion considers how the relative position of *Hamilton* has shifted post-Obama and pays particular attention to Mike Pence’s visit to the musical, framed by the *New York Times* as “the first major collision between the two Americas” since the 2016 US presidential election.<sup>6</sup> In the Trump era, *Hamilton* has become a commodity of the resistance as patriotic pluralism continues to sell.

#### NATIONALIST NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION

The concept of nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion locates *Hamilton* and Obama within the intersecting political axes of nation, capital, and race. An imagined community brought together by cultural commonalities and circulated media, the nation demands that a people identify with it, defend it, and socially reproduce it.<sup>7</sup> Seventy percent of Americans agree or strongly agree with the statement that they consider themselves patriotic.<sup>8</sup> The nation labors to supersede other markers of difference—race, gender, class, sexuality, ability status—in the name of unity. Obama epitomized this sentiment when he entered the national stage and gave the keynote at the 2004 Democratic National Convention: “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.”<sup>9</sup> The tome “*Hamilton*”: *The Revolution*, which contains the libretto for the musical as well

as footnotes and essays situating its original production, cites this Obama quotation in its epilogue.<sup>10</sup> Nationalism calls upon US Americans to celebrate the nation and honor its origins while castigating departures such as kneeling during the national anthem as unnecessarily divisive.

Neoliberalism works with nationalism by linking market values to freedom. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as an economic program of changes pursued since the 1970s to promote privatization, financialization, lower taxes, a smaller safety net, and less regulation.<sup>11</sup> Unlike earlier laissez-faire liberalism, neoliberalism calls upon the state to aid growth, competition, and transnational corporations in the extraction and circulation of capital. Offering another definition that builds upon Michel Foucault’s lectures on biopolitics,<sup>12</sup> Wendy Brown views the market rationality of neoliberalism as a governing logic by means of which human beings become capital, work tirelessly to maximize themselves and attract investments, and run all institutions like businesses: “all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*.”<sup>13</sup> Others like Lisa Lowe, however, argue that this development is far from new because people of color have been framed as property and free wage labor since the age of colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

Multicultural inclusion then advances the interests of nation and capital by welcoming a limited assortment of others into an existing center as long as they do not radically challenge power. Scholar, producer, and funder Roberta Uno has critiqued the mobilization of “the term multicultural . . . as a hegemonic, discursive site . . . that minimizes difference, that celebrates common human experience, and that provides representation in often rigidly defined slots.”<sup>15</sup> In *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Jodi Melamed considers neoliberal multiculturalism an official antiracist regime that portrays “the United States as an ostensibly multicultural democracy and the model for the entire world, but in a way that has posited neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than redistribute resources to achieve parity, neoliberal multiculturalism demands that diverse actors compete with each other in ways that ultimately maintain capitalism and white supremacy. Putting these terms together, “nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion” is a political project that encourages people to honor and identify with a nation because of its supposed basis in meritocratic competition and racial diversity, suggesting that everyone has a shot to achieve the American Dream and to belong in the dominant narrative.

The American Dream entails the belief that Americans have a chance at the good life by pulling themselves up by the bootstraps. Texts from the early republic by Benjamin Franklin and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur maintained that hard work led to success, even for immigrants.<sup>17</sup> In the nineteenth century, Irish and other European immigrants took up this credo and took jobs as they integrated into whiteness,<sup>18</sup> while blackness was criminalized.<sup>19</sup> Horatio Alger’s popular stories became associated with celebrations of the self-made American entrepreneur.<sup>20</sup> When Obama took office during a recession, in 2009, the Economic Mobility Project found that eight in ten Americans thought it was “still possible

to get ahead despite the current economy,” and 71 percent believed that “personal attributes, like hard work and drive, are more important to economic mobility than external conditions, like the economy and economic circumstances growing up.”<sup>21</sup> Wealthy people were more likely to give credence to this worldview, exude optimism, and exhibit better well-being outcomes.<sup>22</sup> In addition, interviewing Latinx entrepreneurs, Zulema Valdez found that her subjects acknowledge systemic racism but also preserve a color-blind lens because they do not think that racial barriers will impede them personally.<sup>23</sup>

Those invested in this ideology have tended to downplay the impact of structural racism and view each person’s lot as deserved. Pollster Cornell Belcher found in June 2008, just prior to the presidential election of Obama, “a prevailing view among whites that Blacks use racism as an excuse for failure (68% believe this), that Blacks have equal opportunities with whites (61% agree), and that Blacks are responsible for any failure to get ahead (55%).”<sup>24</sup> Thirty percent of voters openly said that Obama “benefited from unfair and undeserved advantages”; in contrast, only 16 percent said the same of the 2008 Republican nominee John McCain, who is white.<sup>25</sup> George Lipsitz has observed that “A paradoxical and nettling combination of racism and disavowal has always permeated the possessive investment in whiteness,” the means by which white people sustain their privileges.<sup>26</sup> In the age of Obama, hegemonic racism looked less like shouting the n-word and more like shouting down Obamacare, which disproportionately benefited people of color, while at the same time denying racial motivations. This color-blind racism preserved the unequal racial status quo by obscuring and/or rationalizing why black Americans had less wealth and how racial segregation in housing and schooling remained as stark as it was forty years ago.

These pervasive beliefs in color-blind meritocracy and disavowal of white supremacy ignored fundamental structural truths about the United States in the age of Obama and did real harm. According to a meta-analysis of job discrimination studies, white applicants with the same qualifications as black ones received 36 percent more callbacks, and that has not changed from 1990 to 2015.<sup>27</sup> The senior sociologist behind the study, Lincoln Quillian, reflected, “A lot of people think we’re becoming post-racial, and the election of Obama kind of pushed things in that direction. But we find over this long period of time real stability in basic hiring discrimination.”<sup>28</sup> Although many US Americans work diligently yet barely sustain their livelihoods, others who do not work hard nevertheless succeed as they accumulate income from interest, rent, capital gains, inheritance, and skimming the surplus value off of exploited laborers, income that often accrues from white privilege.<sup>29</sup>

#### OBAMA, MIRANDA, AMERICA

But by electing Barack Obama in 2008, the United States appeared to have dismantled racial hierarchy. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva maintains, “We have seen the rise of a few, carefully chosen minorities who are willing to propound a happy version of the American story, and the elevation of these minority politicians as ‘evidence’ that America has overcome.”<sup>30</sup> He enumerates how



**Figure 1.**

Barack Obama and Lin-Manuel Miranda at the White House in March 2016. Courtesy Barack Obama Presidential Library.

Obama rhetorically distinguished racism from “real” problems plaguing the nation, a linguistic move that made this black politician appealing to whites. Essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates contends that Obama reached the White House by genuinely believing in the goodness of white people and disbelieving the depths of structural racism.<sup>31</sup> Performing close readings of Obama’s speeches, Stephanie Li theorizes as “signifying without specifying” how the former president foregrounded national unity over racial difference and black liberation: “The freedom of African Americans is not his goal; instead, he looks to the creation of ‘a more perfect union.’”<sup>32</sup> For example, in 2013 when Obama addressed graduates of the historically black Morehouse College, he both acknowledged the existence of discrimination yet urged “Nobody cares if you suffered some discrimination,” and “we’ve got no time for excuses.”<sup>33</sup> He qualified structural oppression with “if” and “some,” and he insinuated that achieving goals is only a matter of desire, unfortunately resonating with stereotypes of black men as lazy. In his typical gloss of nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion, Obama pronounced, “it is important for all of us – black, white and brown – to advocate for an America where everybody has got a fair shot in life.”<sup>34</sup> During his time in office, economic disparities between white and black Americans increased, and police officers and vigilantes received more attention for disproportionately killing unarmed black people.

President Obama became a spokesman of sorts for *Hamilton* because the musical seemed to perform representational and political work very similar to his own. In 2009, the White House invited Lin-Manuel Miranda to perform and presumed that he would use an excerpt from *In the Heights*, Miranda's first Broadway musical, which dramatizes the daily struggles of Latinx people in the New York neighborhood of Washington Heights through Latin musical and dance styles. Instead, he performed what would become the opening of *Hamilton*. When he introduced his subject as a classic hip-hop story of growing up in poverty and getting shot in a duel—Alexander Hamilton—his audience laughed because of the unexpected juxtaposition of this revered white historical figure with historically devalued black and brown bodies. The racial diversity of the original cast resonated with Obama as the first US president of color to the point that Ron Chernow and others have said that the cast reflects “Obama’s America.”<sup>35</sup>

Since the musical premiered, Obama has seen the production multiple times and hosted Miranda and the cast at the White House (Fig. 1), where they performed “Alexander Hamilton” and “My Shot,” the songs in *Hamilton* that best embody the bootstraps ethos. At the 2016 Tony Awards, Barack and Michelle Obama introduced the company of *Hamilton*, the First Lady calling the nation “a place of opportunity, where no matter how humble our origins we can make it if we try.”<sup>36</sup> Obama and Miranda share not only this language but also policy proposals for governments to serve business interests. In 2016, Obama and Miranda endorsed the Paul Ryan–led Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which provided funds for the deeply indebted island at the cost of a nonelected American Enterprise Institute–inflected review board, austerity measures, and the removal of the minimum wage for some jobs.<sup>37</sup> The legislation built on the post–World War II Operation Bootstraps project to privatize Puerto Rican resources, take advantage of cheaper labor for manufacturing and exporting goods, and solidify the mainland’s colonialist relationship to the island.<sup>38</sup>

Examining the habitus of Miranda, a proud Puerto Rican, provides another clue to understanding *Hamilton*’s politics. Raised in New York, he enjoyed an elite education from Hunter College High School to Wesleyan University. His parents emigrated from Puerto Rico; his mother became a clinical psychologist, while his father, Luis, became a political consultant for figures like New York mayor Ed Koch, and Lin worked on campaigns. In 2016, Luis Miranda helped to create an offshoot company named The Hamilton Campaign Network, conjuring not only the historic figure but also his son’s highly successful musical. In accordance with *Hamilton*’s centrist politics, the company worked for several members of the New York Senate Independent Democratic Conference.<sup>39</sup> This group consisted of Democrats who broke off with the party to join with Republican members, giving the GOP legislative control to advance their agenda of privatizing education and preserving resources for the white and wealthy.<sup>40</sup> The Mirandas are embedded in multiethnic, bipartisan establishment centrism. Lin-Manuel Miranda reflected, “*Hamilton* is more autobiographical than [*In the*] *Heights* for me — not in the sense that I feel like I’m Hamilton, but in terms of how I feel about life and our

country,”<sup>41</sup> though both musicals fit the artist’s political project for promoting scrappy entrepreneurship to survive within, rather than change, material conditions.<sup>42</sup>

Miranda himself has invited discourse espousing the American Dream, bringing together conservatives and liberals. From interviews to the opening lines of *Hamilton*, he praised an immigrant from the Caribbean who wrote his way into success, much like himself. Summarizing the musical, Republican and former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities Lynne Cheney said, “It’s a play about human beings who achieved greatly.”<sup>43</sup> Judith Rodin, author of *The Resilience Dividend* and then-head of the Rockefeller Foundation, similarly remarked, “it features an immigrant who is impoverished initially and shows through perseverance and grit what he can achieve.”<sup>44</sup> Instead of reallocating resources to poor immigrants, this ideology celebrates “great” men and encourages hard work as the resolution to poverty. On the left-leaning side, at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, the nominee Hillary Clinton concluded her speech with lyrics from *Hamilton*, defining the “story of America” as incremental reform, sewn seeds connecting the founding fathers with Americans today in the fight “to build something better” for “love of country.”<sup>45</sup> To counter the conservative slogan “Make America Great Again,” Democrats answered, “America is already great.” *Hamilton* hosted fund-raisers for Democrats, and Miranda explicitly showed his support at the Broadway for Clinton concert. But not wanting to alienate the right wing, he wrote in the summer of 2015 after Trump called Mexicans rapists and drug dealers, “My reaction to [Trump’s] comments about Mexicans isn’t important. . . . I’m trying to take the long view and not make Trump a part of my life.”<sup>46</sup> He took an anti-Trump stance just prior to the November election when Trump seemed like he would lose, and the Broadway production was safely in the black.

Miranda rejects partisan interpretations of *Hamilton*. He favors humanizing people who have been put on pedestals: “It’s not angels versus devils. If there’s any political takeaway, it’s that the founding fathers were incredibly human.”<sup>47</sup> Miranda emphasizes the importance of bringing white presidents down to earth and elevating black people embodying presidents. He accomplishes this humanism by showing Burr’s ambitiousness and Hamilton’s extramarital affair, but mostly by casting actors of color: “It’s a way of pulling you into the story and allowing you to leave whatever cultural baggage you have about the founding fathers at the door.”<sup>48</sup> Invested in making early US history accessible to people of color, Miranda demands that audiences forget the “cultural baggage” of how this nation was built upon dispossession, slavery, and genocide. In an oft-repeated refrain, he has claimed, “This is a story about America then, told by America now, and we want to eliminate any distance—our story should look the way our country looks. . . . I think it’s a very powerful statement without having to be a statement.”<sup>49</sup> As Lyra D. Monteiro has argued, Miranda erases the people of color who resided in eighteenth-century North America. She asks, “Is this the history that we most want black and brown youth to connect with—one in which black lives so clearly do not matter?”<sup>50</sup> Contemporary people of color become largely a superficial aesthetic of skin colors to showcase the harmonious rainbow hue

of the United States rather than historic and continuing racial struggle. Alex Nichols of *Current Affairs* has called this revisionist history “‘blackwashing,’ making something that was heinous seem somehow palatable by retroactively injecting diversity into it.”<sup>51</sup> Museum consultant Jason Allen similarly dubbed *Hamilton* “a product of a white American cultural narrative disguised as a unifying color-blind narrative that reaffirms a supposedly shared origin myth.”<sup>52</sup> In articulating a kind of dematerialized politics, Miranda avoids alienating statement-making, as if standing up for racial justice needs a prefatory apology. Occupying a seemingly apolitical middle position, Miranda’s *Hamilton* attracts both sides of the aisle. Obama, Miranda, and US hegemonic critical discourse embrace patriotism, the myth that hard work equals success, and surface diversity while rejecting explicit politics precisely in order to advance a centrist project.

#### CASTING AS COVER

In the musical proper, nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion plays out principally through the multiracial cast in relation to the bootstraps plot. The cast boasts black, Latinx, Asian, mixed-race, and white performers, the latter portraying English and pro-English characters, King George and Samuel Seabury. Like in other musical productions of the era, such as Arena Stage’s multiracial version of *Oklahoma!* in Washington, DC in 2010, *Hamilton* operates across three modes of casting interpretation: multiracial-conscious, whitened, and postracial.<sup>53</sup> When the legible race of the actors maps onto their respective characters in the multiracial-conscious lens, the presence of actors of color stages a more inclusive United States where revolutionary history can belong to US Americans of color. When black actor Christopher Jackson played George Washington and Barack Obama occupied the White House, the president was black onstage and off-. Jennifer DeVere Brody proposes that “hyphenates [such as African-Americans] who incarnate the margin disturb binaries by throwing such straight-forward [*sic*] narratives into disarray,” challenging the normative link between whiteness and Americanness.<sup>54</sup> While Americanness appears racially diverse in this casting framework, England appears whitened and in the wrong. Collapsing the distance, as Miranda said, the casting color scheme promotes a dubious connection between the freedom that affluent US white men sought in order to avoid paying taxes and the liberation that people of color have sought both historically and in the present. This chronicle suggests that the arc of US history bends toward justice, an understanding that assumes equitable distribution of power is inevitable rather than changeable and shaped by structures. When Jefferson wrote that all men are created equal, he surely meant to include poor people, white women, and people of color, and *Hamilton* completes this inclusion work by casting a black performer, Daveed Diggs, as Jefferson in the original production. In her analysis of representations of early American history, Heather Nathans links *Hamilton* to William Cooper Nell, a black abolitionist who staged in 1858 a *tableau vivant* of the Boston massacre with all black performers. She contends that the performance “forecast a day when actors of color might rise up and claim their true rights and privileges.”<sup>55</sup>



Yet *Hamilton* features virtually zero black historical figures, whereas Nell centered on Crispus Attucks.

Because the musical actors play mostly white people, audiences could also read the characters in *Hamilton* as white. In a literal sense, audiences understand that Jackson is a black actor but playing a white historical figure. The “great” white man’s history of the United States is thus preserved. When whites see people of color in prestigious positions, they are more likely to believe that systemic racism has ceased. Toward the end of Obama’s two terms, a Pew study found that 62 percent of white Americans “say their race or ethnicity hasn’t made a difference in their success.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, some artist-educators have mobilized the discursive phrase that we now live in the age of *Hamilton* to justify casting white actors to play people of color, as in Kent State University’s production of *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall with a white Martin Luther King Jr. and Clarion University’s recent attempt to stage *Jesus in India* by Lloyd Suh with non-Asians.<sup>57</sup> When Suh stopped the production, in part because the university never secured the rights, the director lamented the negative impact upon the white students as the actually oppressed victims.<sup>58</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed has also written on the ambivalence and consequence of observing and then looking past the performers’ racialized bodies in *Hamilton*:

We are asked to be open to their blackness so that the play’s touted message—that the founding era also “belongs” to black people—gets through. At the same time, we are presumably not to be so open to the actors’ blackness that we feel discomfited seeing them dancing around during the sublime “The Schuyler Sisters” proclaiming how “lucky” they were “to be alive” during a time of African chattel slavery.<sup>59</sup>

To resolve the contradiction between the actor of color and the white character, spectators could view the production through a postracial lens. Although race is socially and historically constructed, to pretend that it has no impact—as a strategy to neutralize impact—ends up covering up and continuing racial inequality. Miranda claimed that he and director Tommy Kail “never threw around the terms ‘colorblind’ or ‘color-conscious.’ That’s how it shook out—it was always with an eye towards, ‘Let’s get the best actors for these characters and these songs.’”<sup>60</sup> First, this assertion contradicts other times when he has said that he deliberately cast for racial diversity to mirror the contemporary United States. In “Miranda’s Manifesto,” Brian Herrera points out how the production team’s casting call used the diction of “nonwhite” (as opposed to the generic “all ethnicities”) that “strategically flips the script of those casting conventions that purport neutrality while actually privileging variations of whiteness as most neutral, versatile, or universal.”<sup>61</sup> As a result of this call, the production team received threats of a lawsuit for discrimination against white actors. Yet the producers have purposefully cast a slew of white men to play King George. Dwayne Keith Mann points out that this casting implies the stability of whiteness in contrast with interchangeable people of color in roles such as that of Angelica Schuyler, who has been played by black and Latina actresses.<sup>62</sup> Miranda clearly

considered race. His explanation also denies affirmative action in favor of a meritocracy so color-blind that the term “color-blind” was never even uttered, though Herrera has dissected the “best actor for the role” line as a myth that mystifies and rationalizes the uneven distribution of parts.<sup>63</sup> Finally, Miranda’s statement ignores the fact that he cast some of his close friends like Jackson, not to mention Miranda himself as Hamilton. By both acknowledging and covering up these careful decisions to include people of color as the American characters, Miranda has it both ways: appealing to those who call for deliberate racial diversity and those who call for colorblind meritocracy. In a telling *New Yorker* piece, Adam Gopnik exhibits the multiracial, white, and postracial modes simultaneously: “*Hamilton* is the Obama-era musical. At the simplest presentational level, it shows previously marginalized people taking on the responsibility and burden of American history.”<sup>64</sup> He processes actors of color as characters of color, implicitly considers US history to have been white or unaffected by people of color, and insinuates that people of color are no longer marginalized. The casting of people of color to embody typically white characters thus showcases the nation as equal, diverse, and inclusive but only under the terms of emphasizing white history makers and softening the salience of race and racism.

#### THE STORY OF “SELF-MADE” MEN

The multiracial casting works in tandem with the bootstraps narrative at the heart of *Hamilton*. In the opening lines, Aaron Burr asks how did Alexander Hamilton become a “hero and a scholar” given his impoverished, orphaned origins in the Caribbean.<sup>65</sup> The next verse offers an answer:

The ten-dollar Founding  
Father without a father  
Got a lot farther by working a lot harder  
By being a lot smarter  
By being a self-starter  
By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter. (16)

The lyrics refer obliquely to how immigrants must hustle more than US-born citizens, even as Miranda celebrates the tenets of entrepreneurialism that link diligence and intelligence with deservingness. In the repeated rhyming of “father,” “farther,” “harder,” “smarter,” “self-starter,” and “charter” and parallel structure of “By being,” he lays out the recipe for success and echoes the relentlessness that neoliberalism demands. In the stage number “My Shot,” Hamilton introduces himself with a pulsating rap with triple and even quadruple rhymes within one couplet to show off his verbal and therefore political dexterity. He stresses his hardships that do not name racism, as the actor’s racialized body does that work: “I shoulder/ Ev’ry burden, ev’ry disadvantage/ I have learned to manage”; and for the chorus he sings, “I am not throwing away my shot,” as more and more performers, mostly of color, join his refrain and his movement (26). He stands his ground, feet firmly planted shoulder width apart, then extending out his hands,

and resting a hand on his heart in a patriotic gesture. With this grounded movement and harmonious singing, as each performer takes up equal space but with Hamilton center stage, the staging demonstrates a belief that everyone has a shot with which to begin. Hamilton later reflects in “Hurricane” that he “wrote [his] way out” of poverty because his poem attracted positive attention (232). When Burr ponders, “How to account for/his rise to the top?/Maaaaan, the man is/non-stop,” he attributes success solely to hard work (137). Hamilton embodies the American Dream. In *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism*, Patricia Ybarra urges that we “scrutinize the romance of the male immigrant entrepreneur as the ideal American” and adds “That this figure enacts Afro- diasporic/Latinx cultural forms cannot undo its reliance on an ideology that disenfranchises all but the most elite members of our society.”<sup>66</sup>

The characters that Miranda chose to surround Hamilton further illuminate the nationalist neoliberal multicultural ideals that the musical disseminates. Hercules Mulligan, a tailor’s apprentice, joins the rebels because “it’s [his] chance/ To socially advance, instead of sewin’ some pants!” (27). Similarly coming from a less prestigious background, Hamilton is constantly anxious to “rise above [his] station” (65) to the extent that he “wished for a war” (60). By portraying these characters as being in vulnerable positions, Miranda advocates climbing up within the existing hierarchical structure literally at the expense of others’ lives. By highlighting John Laurens as an abolitionist and framing the Marquis de Lafayette as an immigrant, Miranda endows Hamilton with an antiracist bent by proxy. Lafayette in particular represents Miranda’s, Obama’s, and bipartisan stances on immigration. When Lafayette and Hamilton team up for the Battle of Yorktown, they say together, “Immigrants: we get the job done” (121), a line that frequently sparked applause and vocal approval to the extent that Miranda had to write in an additional beat. Late in Obama’s second term, this enthusiastic audience response expressed proimmigrant sentiment when many other US Americans voiced support for building a wall along the Mexican border, banning Muslim immigrants, and rejecting Syrian refugees. But this ovation specifically and contingently rested upon the labor that immigrants perform as proving them worthy. James McMaster argues, “This is the familiar and fallacious narrative that founds the logic of mainstream, immigration-unfriendly politicians on the right (Trump’s wall) and on the left (Obama’s exceptional DREAMers).”<sup>67</sup> In 2012, Obama issued the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy via executive order to suspend deportations of undocumented immigrants who arrived to the United States as children and to provide work permits if they met certain qualifications such as committing no crimes. An antiracist initiative, DACA has covered immigrants mostly of Latinx and Asian heritage. Using nationalist neoliberal multicultural thinking, the policy heavily relies upon arguments that undocumented people benefit the US economy with their entrepreneurship, labor, and taxes. They make valuable US Americans. Most citizens supported DACA, but Trump attempted to nullify the policy in 2017.<sup>68</sup>

Although not an immigrant, Aaron Burr provides a crucial example, within the musical, of the entrepreneurial US man of color. Initially played Off-Broadway by black actor Leslie Odom Jr., Burr longs to be “in the room where it happens,”

where politicians make the decisions (186–90). His embodiment encourages readings of this song as being about the exclusion of Burr as well as black people more generally from full political participation in the United States. In *Black Is a Country*, Nikhil Pal Singh traces how the nation became designated as the horizon for enacting equality:

Today there is no more powerful way to represent the political universality of the U.S. nation-state than to have black people stand in for the nation at large. Yet, the projection of images of black inclusion (often through the elevation of exemplary individuals) minimizes a contentious, unfinished history of collective struggles against white supremacist monopolies on nationalist ideals and practices. More ironically, enlisting blacks in the story of the nation's transcendence of the racial past perpetuates the idea that the exemplary national subject is still somehow not black and that visible racial difference remains the real deficit and obstacle to be overcome.<sup>69</sup>

Standing in for Obama, Odom as Burr epitomizes this national inclusion of extraordinary individual blackness by playing a white character. Electing Obama twice and casting people of color as the founding fathers represented the antiracist goodness of the United States, yet paradoxically suggested the limits of transcendence and conditions of multiculturalism. In the song, Burr realizes that he must act more aggressively, like Hamilton, if he wants to become a power player. While Hamilton musically identifies with straight-talking hip-hop, here Burr identifies with flashy jazz performance. Over the course of the song, the trumpet sample that punctuates the verses begins to underscore the lyrics, and the musical vamping eggs Burr on. He switches from the lyric “I want to be in the room where it happens” to “I got to be in the room where it happens,” repeating with insistence, holding a long note on “room,” and taking up more and more room (186–90). Center stage and surrounded by the ensemble, Odom moves from side to side with staccato steps, raised arms bent at the elbow and at the wrist, and wagging fingers, choreography reminiscent of Michael Jackson in “Thriller,” another black man using his virtuosity to navigate zombielike capitalism.<sup>70</sup> As Marx reminds us, the miser who hoards gets nothing because they “wait for it wait for it,” as Hamilton taunts Burr (188), whereas the capitalist gets ahead by having skin in the game, reinvesting, and taking risks.<sup>71</sup> Under neoliberalism, the goal is not equity but getting ahead. According to Wendy Brown, “The guarantee of equality through the rule of law and participation in popular sovereignty is replaced with a market formulation of winners and losers.”<sup>72</sup> To have a shot at being included in the room and nation where it happens, Obama, Burr, and black people must replicate a system of endless accumulation, competition, and decision-making by dominantly elite white men, rather than tearing down the walls of the room to enable everyone to enter the space and change the rules.<sup>73</sup>

The limit to Miranda's rhetoric that people of color can achieve the American Dream through persistent labor is that *Hamilton* simultaneously suggests that success is contingent. Although Hamilton recovered from illness at a young age, his mother was not so lucky. Washington reminds him, “You have

no control/Who lives who dies who tells your story” (120). Try as he might, Hamilton, just like other immigrants, do not really have an automatic path to wealth via hard work. Obstacles and chance block the way. Nothing in the musical underscores this more than how Burr ultimately shoots Hamilton dead in a duel. Nationalist neoliberal multiculturalism fosters precarity. In popular discourses of the musical, however, pundits have tended to leave out qualifications to prop up the American Dream.

#### APART FROM THE NARRATIVE

Furthermore, under this political project, materialist histories of slavery and genocide cannot be included. Patricia Herrera, Ishmael Reed, and Lyra D. Monteiro have all critiqued *Hamilton* for eliding the violent history of slavery and black people, such as the enslaved people who would have been serving in the room where it happens.<sup>74</sup> In addition, scholars from Edmund Morgan to Chandan Reddy assert that structural oppression is fundamental, not exceptional, to the founding of the United States and its conception of freedom.<sup>75</sup> The stakes for downplaying slavery are high. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, only 8 percent of high-school seniors correctly identified slavery as the key cause of the Civil War.<sup>76</sup> As president, Obama was largely as vulnerable to this critique of softening slavery as is Miranda. When the National African American History Museum opened on the Washington Mall in September 2016, he delivered a speech that, at each turn of acknowledging slavery, counterbalanced with refrains like “all men are created equal,” “all of us are American,” and “[the museum] can also help black visitors appreciate the fact that . . . within the white communities across the nation we see the sincerity of law enforcement officers,” officers whose history dates back to the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, in her 2016 DNC speech, when Michelle Obama alluded to how enslaved people built the White House in which she and her black children lived, she received intense backlash from people who refused to believe that this was a fact or felt distressed hearing it.<sup>78</sup> There was no political benefit to Obama speaking unequivocally about how white supremacy shaped the United States. Like President Obama, Miranda relies upon the racialized bodies of color in his cast to do the work of marking histories of racial hierarchy instead of articulating structural analyses. The historiographical flaws in Miranda’s approach, like Obama’s approach, reside not in any specific historical inaccuracy but in how he dramatizes actually existing people of color and how that story aligns with his centrist-nationalist political position, and thus with Obama’s calls for national, bipartisan unity.<sup>79</sup>

When Miranda mentions the continued existence of slavery in *Hamilton* after the American founding, he blames Jefferson’s politics and Laurens’s death. The musical repeatedly implicates Jefferson in the institution, such as when Hamilton upbraids him in a rap battle (“We know who’s really doing the planting”; 161) and ensemble members wear white gloves and black chokers as they mime manual labor around him in “What’d I Miss?” In one of the earliest lines in the musical, Diggs, who goes on to play Jefferson, narrates “slaves were being slaughtered and carted/Away across the waves” (16). Having a

black actor deliver this lyric, Miranda finds racialized embodied legacy to be a searing and satisfactory critique. Yet the passive voice removes responsibility. Dreama Moon observes that “Passive voice enables whitepeople [*sic*] to recognize historical events (and thereby demonstrate their tolerance and empathy for racial others), while repressing any connection to them.”<sup>80</sup> Lines mentioning the existence of slavery and upbraiding Jefferson for his participation constitute a necessary but insufficient critique because the musical does not implicate *all* of the founding fathers in the institutionalization of slavery in the United States. For example, when the characters discuss selling the capital down the river, a slavery metaphor, they do not mention that part of the deal was to ignore the demands of Quaker abolitionists not to locate the nation’s political center in proslavery territory. In addition, Miranda attributes crucial intelligence on British movements to Hercules Mulligan, not to the person Mulligan enslaved, Cato. Consider too the brief appearance of the only historically black character in the musical, Sally Hemings, who wordlessly shimmies instead of calling out her rapist; troublingly, Miranda has had Hamilton refer to her as Jefferson’s “mistress[ ]” (213). This decontextualization, a crucial component of nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion, permits spectators to take greater pleasure in the narrative. In the end, Hamilton endorses Jefferson over Burr because the former has (proslavery) values, whereas the latter has none. At the same time, the musical continually praises Laurens and Hamilton as “A bunch of revolutionary manumission abolitionists” (27) to frame the United States and its founders as popular antiracists, enabling an American audience to applaud their nation, their history, and themselves. When Laurens sings, “we’ll never be truly free/Until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me!” (27), Miranda as both Hamilton and himself interjects, “That’s right!” on the original Broadway cast recording.<sup>81</sup> Miranda has shared that he imagines slavery in the United States could have ended sooner if only Laurens, a radical whose black battalion plan never even came to fruition, or Hamilton, a slave trader, had lived longer (131 n. 2; 281). In so doing, Miranda reiterates his great-man notion of historical causality rather than a structural understanding of racial capitalism. He does not discuss that it was the British who freed large numbers of enslaved people after the Revolutionary War and who ended slavery decades before the United States did so. Nor does he add that the donations that Hamilton received to move to the mainland were from enslavers, that the ship on which he sailed to New York was a slave ship, that the family he married into was a slaveholding family for which he handled transactions in human beings. To uphold the happy history of nationalist neoliberal multiculturalism, he cannot include these uncomfortable reminders that belie US myths of meritocracy and equality. This silencing reproduces the white narrative that *Hamilton* appears to resist.

Miranda’s decision to cut a cabinet rap battle tackling slavery provides further insight into the parameters of this political project. The *Hamilton* tome contains a draft of the number with Jefferson distancing himself from the South and offering an ambivalent yet proslavery argument warning of secession and the difficulty of “cur[ing] prejudice,” language that implies enslaving people on the basis of race is like a cold that anybody could catch and can be easily remedied (212–13).

Hamilton, on the other hand, stresses that slavery must end because it is dehumanizing. Washington concludes that it would be too difficult and expensive to abolish slavery. According to Miranda, the *Hamilton* team cut this song because it “didn’t shed new light on the characters” and “none of the Founding Fathers did anything to stop [slavery]” (223). They did not want to present the protagonist as a “fake moral hero,” even though that is precisely what they did.<sup>82</sup> The song could have shed new light: Miranda does not include the white supremacist rhetoric that would have driven this conversation, such as Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, suggesting a discomfort with confronting the founding fathers’ deliberate institutionalization of slavery. As in Obama’s public speeches, he has more interest in listing accomplishments than in making the characters, the United States, and the US audience complicit.

Finally, *Hamilton* never addresses the existence of Native Americans, an act of erasure and symbolic genocide, and few scholars have taken notice of this absence.<sup>83</sup> Indigenous characters and performers have no place in a musical that, in the long run, celebrates the construction of the United States. Indigenous studies scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui contends, “The notion that colonialism is something that ends with the dissolving of the British colonies when the original thirteen became the early US states has its counterpart narrative in the myth that indigenous peoples ended when colonialism ended.”<sup>84</sup> When Lafayette urges Washington to “fight for your land back” in the Revolutionary War, he implies that the settler colonists have legitimate claim to the land (118). In “My Shot,” Hamilton relatedly proclaims, “We roll like Moses, claimin’ our promised land” (29), invoking Manifest Destiny. Reminders of the existence and rights of indigenous people would undercut the musical’s political project. Contributing to this silencing of native people, the discourse surrounding *Hamilton* in the Obama era regularly framed the United States as a “nation of immigrants.” Public Theater producer Oskar Eustis told *Smithsonian Magazine* that playwright Tony Kushner said that the musical “is convincing everybody of the need to see this nation as a nation of immigrants,” and the author of the article added, “We’re all here from somewhere else. America, Mother of Exiles.”<sup>85</sup> Although this diction includes whites and immigrants of color, it elides indigenous people and enslaved people from the Middle Passage. Having actors of color play white immigrants similarly works to make everyone except Native Americans feel included. Nationalist neoliberal multiculturalism can contain only certain people in its popular narrative.

#### HAMILTON AFTER OBAMA

The links among *Hamilton*, Obama, and immigrants have intensified after the election of Trump. Because the center of the political dial moved right, the relative positionality of the musical went leftward. In the age of Obama, the dominant Right and Left condemned the likes of former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan David Duke. But when an outright white supremacist killed an antiracist protestor in Charlottesville in 2017, the new president dubbed Nazis and KKK members “very fine people,”<sup>86</sup> and 11 percent of Americans openly agreed with this

sentiment when surveyed.<sup>87</sup> The political consensus around nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion embraced by Barack Obama and Dick Cheney has been fraying. Even so, Trump has repeatedly insisted that he is “the least racist person that you’ve ever encountered,” and his press secretary suggested firing a journalist for calling Trump a white supremacist.<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, Bonilla-Silva insists in the fifth edition of *Racism without Racists* that color-blind racism continues as the hegemonic form of the US racial order.<sup>89</sup> In this context, *Hamilton* has come to symbolize an unapologetic vision of the nation as righteously racially diverse.

When Vice President–elect Mike Pence attended *Hamilton* on 18 November 2016, just a week after the election, Broadway audience members booed him, an act that received national media attention. Others in the crowd cheered for him, which received much less notice. News stories emphasized the curtain speech directed to Pence and delivered by black actor Brandon Victor-Dixon, who played Burr at this performance: “We, sir, are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us. All of us.”<sup>90</sup> Composed by Miranda, the producers, and the cast, the speech expressed sincere concern for future attacks upon minoritized people. The diction obliquely referenced yet did not name the Trump administration’s threats to deport undocumented people, build a border wall, ban Muslims, prohibit abortion, and compel LGBTQ people into electroshock therapy. Calling Pence “sir” twice, Dixon showed deference to the Vice President–elect. His invocation of “American values” identified such values as equality and diversity rather than the white supremacy and capitalism that have undergirded this nation. By calling for unity and repeating “all of us,” Dixon suggested that such togetherness is possible and desirable, a perspective that presumed people with privilege want to create a level playing field. Emblematic of *Hamilton* itself, this centrist-liberal plea appealed to nationalism, tolerance, and respectability politics instead of bluntly naming real threats and urging, “Do not kill us.” With the Left in a less powerful position, the address took on a supplicatory valence. Yet propriety will never appease white supremacy. In response to the milquetoast oration, Trump blasted the artists behind *Hamilton* because they “harassed” Pence, and some Republicans called for a boycott of the musical.<sup>91</sup> In the end, Pence, a Cheney-esque Republican establishment figure, said that he liked the musical. It did not appear to make him uncomfortable, and the speech did not appear to make him endorse policies for material equality. Still, the political center shifted to the right. During Obama’s tenure, the far-right, fake news website *Breitbart* had been a lone voice in condemning *Hamilton* for its multiracial vision of the United States, but now its voice has multiplied and amplified.

And so in this contemporary moment, the resistance to the hegemonic power of the Republican Party and its leader Donald Trump has taken up *Hamilton* as part of its cultural repertoire. As anti-immigration rhetoric and policies ramp up, the musical represents inclusivity specifically of immigrants. From the *Hamilton Mix Tape*, an album of hip-hop and R&B covers and original tracks inspired by the musical, the music video for “Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)” won the



2017 MTV Video Music Award for “Best Fight against the System.” Even as hip-hop circulates as a popular commodity, artist-scholar Daniel Banks insists, “rap, in any form, serves as important cultural critique.”<sup>92</sup> *Hamilton* has been mobilized as an anthem for Obama’s values. Shana L. Redmond explains, “anthems require subscription to a system of beliefs that stir and organize the receivers of the music. At its best this system inspires its listeners to believe that the circumstances or world around them can change for the better.”<sup>93</sup> At the post-Inauguration Women’s March and the 2017 May Day rallies across the United States, some protestors held signs proclaiming, “Immigrants: We get the job done.” They took pride in immigrants and in *Hamilton* as the art of immigrants, staking a claim to their belonging in the United States through Miranda’s work.

In turn, *Hamilton* has capitalized on the resistance. If you do not want to make your own sign or shirt, you can purchase one from Miranda’s personal merchandise platform TeeRico, a brand mash-up of T-shirts and Puerto Rico. When searching for “TeeRico” via Google, the results bring up the blurb “Every design benefits a cause and/or the creative artist.”<sup>94</sup> In this neoliberal venture, customers can buy not only objects but also progressive affect and identity, as if their consumption makes a positive difference. Under the category “Linspiration,” Miranda sells T-shirts that proclaim “RESIST” in which slogans in small typeface create the silhouettes of the capital letters. The repeated sequence begins with “THIS IS NOT NORMAL,” a refrain to refuse normalizing the Trump administration’s flouting of conventional procedures—from announcing blatantly discriminatory policies like the Muslim ban to firing the FBI director for investigating him—all done apparently without prior consultation of experts. But the sequence also contains phrases like “CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES” and “TAKE THE HIGH ROAD,” recommendations to avoid conflict rather than engage in sustained struggle.<sup>95</sup> In line with the *Hamilton* philosophy to write your way out of poverty, the merchandise suggests that you can buy products and cliché-message your way out of systemic oppression.

Miranda ultimately profits from commodifying nationalist neoliberal multiculturalism. Defending *Hamilton*’s politics, theatre historian Ellen Noonan called the musical “undoubtedly a liberal, incremental piece of art rather than a radical one, which is exactly the kind of art you should expect to find in the deeply for-profit precincts of Broadway.”<sup>96</sup> When the original cast members demanded a share of the *Hamilton* profits on the basis of their creative labor in shaping the musical, Miranda urged them to work for free in the #Ham4Ham preshow performances, and he declined to join their fight for fairer compensation.<sup>97</sup> He has organized fund-raising raffles with some proceeds going to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, a nonprofit dedicated to the “study and love” of the United States.<sup>98</sup> Because the institute has bought tickets to *Hamilton* for New York public school students and helped to integrate the musical into lesson plans, the donations go back to Miranda and the producers who, in exchange, bolster a nationalist organization. Funding such organizations upholds the non-profit–industrial complex, far from a radically democratic means of collecting and distributing wealth. Scholar and prison abolitionist Dylan Rodríguez notes, “organized dissent movements and organizations in the United States are often

compelled to replicate the bureaucratic structures of the small business, large corporation, and state.<sup>99</sup>

The price of nationalist neoliberal multicultural inclusion is celebrating the nation's aestheticized racial diversity and individual bootstraps success at the expense of critiquing the material inequalities purposefully created and sustained by people like Hamilton. Indexing the age of Obama, the musical rearticulated Americanness as racially diverse. Although this counternarrative has been extremely important for its inclusion work, especially post-Obama when approximately half of the US population longs for a white supremacist definition of Americanness, it demands that the oppressed endorse the national project for the sake of unity. The diversity definition permits limited entrance to the United States to those complying with juridical, economic, and behavioral dictates. It uses the nation as the pivot for material equality instead of imagining new collectivities. Many people want to be in the room where it happens but cannot afford the price of admission. Some are locked out because they were never meant to be included. Yet others pursue antiracist, anticapitalist work beyond the nation. For true revolutionaries, it is not enough to open the doors to the room. They must explode it. "Click-boom" (190).

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