



Lin Manuel Miranda's Portrayal of Immigrants: How *Hamilton* Shows us a Modern Stereotypical Portrayal of the Immigrant and Why Alexander Hamilton's Historical Context Changes His Story

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LIN MANUEL MIRANDA'S MUSICAL, *Hamilton*, shows us a striking portrayal of founding father, Alexander Hamilton, who appears in the musical as the quintessential immigrant: "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" (Miranda). But, if we are to understand this "Ten dollar, founding father," it is important to also understand Miranda's personal connection to the immigrant and common modern ideals of what it means to be an American immigrant who, through sheer will, brains, and hard work, achieves his place as an American. Is this image of an immigrant really the reality? How does Miranda's own experience as a son of immigrants both enrich and skew his musical's tone and narrative surrounding the real individual that was Alexander Hamilton? Our modern understanding of what it means to be an immigrant differs from our forefathers' concept of this idea; how does writing "about America then, told by America now" change Hamilton's story (Craft 430)? By examining others' critiques we see how *Hamilton* was shaped by both Miranda's personal experience and by common stereotypical views of the ideal immigrant. It is essential for us to understand how the musical's personally driven narrative neglects to show the difference between historical and modern immigration in the United States in favor of a more modern and hopeful stereotype of what immigrants might be.

As we examine the portrayal of Hamilton as a "hard working" immigrant, it is important to acknowledge and examine how Miranda's portrayal of Hamilton is shaped by his own unique Puerto Rican-American experience in New York City. Both Hogeland and Kajikawa mention the deep personal influence Miranda's own experiences had in creating the musical, and the "young, scrappy and hungry," yet incredibly brilliant character of Alexander Hamilton. Miranda himself says, "I recognize that relentlessness in people I know...not only in my father who came here from Puerto Rico at the age of 18 to get his education and never went back home, just like Hamilton, but also so

many immigrant stories I know... they know they have to work twice as hard to get half as far. That's just the deal—that's the price of admission to our country" (Hogeland 24). This deep connection to Hamilton that Miranda developed through his understanding of the immigrant struggle is key in producing the life and vitality animating Hamilton's character. But Hogeland would suggest that Ron Chernow—author of *Alexander Hamilton*, and Miranda's inspiration for the musical—conveyed a faulty image of Hamilton in his biography, showing him, "as embodying an enduring archetype: the obscure immigrant who comes to America, re-creates himself, and succeeds despite a lack of proper birth and breeding" (24). It seems that from the project's inception the stereotype of the ideal immigrant was involved, inspiring Miranda to find this somewhat false personal connection to Hamilton. Looking at how Hamilton's background as an immigrant shapes the audience's view of his character, and delving into analyzing the differences, similarities, and stereotypes involved in Alexander Hamilton's historical experience as a white immigrant in early America, versus Miranda's, and modern America's, immigrant experiences, is a complex distinction that the musical fails to convey. Rather, Hamilton's story as an immigrant seems to be crafted based on Miranda's legitimate, but modern, understanding of what it means to be an immigrant. Miranda's conception may even lean on stereotypes of the modern immigrant who works smarter, faster, and harder in order to achieve the American dream and become a "true American." It is important to analyze the differences, similarities, and stereotypes present in Lin Manuel Miranda's compared to Alexander Hamilton's historical reality.

While it is undeniable that Alexander Hamilton came to America from Jamaica and worked harder and smarter than other founding fathers with strong plantation-owning families to support them, it is important to not impose our preconceptions of who Hamilton was and represents, to the point of erasing the historical truth of Hamilton's life and experience. One strong point that Hogeland

makes in his article as he critiques biographer Chernow is that, “Alexander Hamilton was not an American immigrant, at least not in the sense intended by Chernow when he invokes the idea. Of course, all European dwellers not only in the thirteen British North American colonies, but also anywhere on the continent, came out of an experience that must be called migrant” (24). As Miranda was inspired by Chernow, these misconceptions and assumptions about Hamilton being an immigrant as we would understand the term, were magnified in the musical, since this idea of the racial and cultural divide found in 18th century colonies is not mentioned at all. Hoffman goes even further, saying that, “it is questionable even to mark Hamilton or any of the founding fathers as ‘immigrants’ at all, as that masks the fact that they were hardly fleeing from oppression but rather were colonizers themselves doing the oppressing” (220). Understanding the context of the British colonies, where status is determined by other factors than the land you were born in, should not discredit Hamilton’s struggle to and for America as a young independent man working for a life and a cause, but it does show us that his story was different from the immigrant story of today.

As we come to realize how past and present racial biases, and the power of Hamilton’s pure genius, make the stereotype Hamilton’s character exudes an unrealistic ideal, how should we respond to the question, “Is *Hamilton* truly a universal story about immigrants who “rise up,” as Miranda would like us to believe, or is it a white tale through and through?” (Hoffman 217). While Hamilton’s theatrical story might inspire us, it might also champion, “The often unspoken side to the American Dream narrative” which is “that if you haven’t ‘made it,’ it’s because you haven’t worked hard enough, not that the system is rigged against people of color” (Hoffman 222). As Hoffman critically asserts, “no matter how much harder they worked, the direct ancestors of the black and brown actors who populate the stage and sing these lines would never have been able to get as far as a white man like Alexander Hamilton could” (222). Furthermore, Hamilton was not only uniquely privileged for being a white man, his success was in many ways only accessible to him because of his genius. As Kajikawa says, “Real genius, like Hamiltonian

genius, will survive its circumstances” (480). Hamilton’s story could never be a true representation of the common immigrant’s experience.

Today, as we look at Miranda’s portrayal of Alexander Hamilton, we need to see the inequalities between Hamilton and the average modern immigrant. But despite this harsh critique, it is also important to recognize the positive impacts that *Hamilton* has produced through shedding light on the modern immigrant struggle through the proxy of a non-immigrant, and inspiring young immigrants despite using perpetuated stereotypes of the model immigrant and the American dream. Overall, as we look at the current relevance of *Hamilton* in a time of growing conflict over the issue of immigration, despite displaying irresponsible omissions of historical and racial truths, *Hamilton* has brought the idea of immigrants’ potential to a wider audience. We can only hope that this audience is able to see not only the legacy of immigrants of the past, but immigrants today as well: immigrants like Miranda’s father.

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