Hamilton: anti-Blackness, Indigenous erasure, and whitewashing Latinxs

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[The Power Dynamics Series: *from a Mixed-Race Latina's perspective*](#)

On our Independence Day (of course, as a Puerto Rican, I use "our" loosely) I could finally afford (a Disney+ subscription) to see *Hamilton*! I quickly found myself snapping and laughing and shouting "¡Wepa!" Even from the small screen in my living room, I could tell this was the best musical I had ever seen: phenomenal music, witty and bold lyrics, breathtaking choreography, and seriously high production value. Seeing remarkably talented Black, Black and other Latinxs, and other actors of color take center stage in theater, and in our nation, did my spirit good. But, then I started to question the messages being conveyed given our current revolutionary moment in American history. With the Black Lives Matter movement in the forefront, one of the ways theaters are responding is by centering **BIPOC** stories. But, should we take this timely re-release of *Hamilton* as an example of what we should be doing?

In many ways, it appears that *Hamilton* is leading the change in American theater. The show has made space for predominantly Black and/or Latinx actors in major venues. It has also accomplished a racially diverse cast without implementing **color-blind casting**. The show does not hide behind the ridiculous notion that we do not see race. It even acknowledges that we also prescribe meaning and value to a person's perceived race.

Critics have questioned its "**nontraditional casting**" choices by asking, "What does it mean for people of color to play slave owners?" That is an important question, but I am also curious as to why it is routinely a darker-skinned Black man that is cast as Aaron Burr, who inevitably shoots Alexander Hamilton? What does it mean that Hamilton, usually a light-skinned Latino, marries the docile light-skinned woman, frequently played by an Asian American actor? Or that

Hamilton secretly loves the strong Black woman? Or has an affair with the exotic Afro-Latina or Mixed-Race woman?

The casting of *Hamilton* is fraught with **colorism**. Colorism is not new. Even Shakespeare loved to rhetorically play with whiteness associated with beauty/purity and blackness with bestiality/deviancy. But rather than using this awareness to challenge stereotypes, *Hamilton* capitalizes on colorism and this country's often unconscious **anti-Black** racism, thereby making it easier for audiences to empathize with the sweet wife, cry when the son dies, distrust Aaron Burr, and feel indifference to Hamilton's discretion with the spicy seductress. It is a deliberate formula that has equated to predominantly white audiences being okay with a racially diverse cast because it does not actually force them to think differently about **race**. The unconscious hierarchy in shades of visible race remains intact.

Even if we chalk-up the apparent colorism to **implicit bias** and laud the play for its multiracial cast, there remains a profound omission of the first, the original "Americans." When the country was being founded, the Founding Fathers were at war not just with the British colonizers, but the Indigenous people whose land they were invading and trying to further colonize. Yet American Indian histories continue to be erased to justify the continued occupation of their land, the very "land of the free" celebrated by Independence Day.

Erasure is a unique aspect of racism since it is hard to shed light on an oppression that is made invisible. You are not going to take the wrong exit and end up on a reservation where you are forced to witness people who are subjected to the worst poverty in this country. You are not going to regularly see the ongoing list of the murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls on the news. You are not likely to point to a history textbook for proof of injustice over the past five hundred years as those injustices are scarcely written. *Hamilton* is contributing to the erasure of American Indians by leaving them out of the cast and out of American history, where they are still referred to in the Declaration of Independence as "the merciless Indian Savages."

While Latinxs are not excluded from the cast, there is a different form of **erasure** of Latinxs taking place in *Hamilton*. The overarching narrative of what it is to be Latinx has been one that denies that many of us are Indigenous and Black (over 4% of the total U.S. population is Afro-Latinx[i]). Instead, the images of Latinxs in the media and portrayed onstage is one of **whitewashing** by only recognizing our European heritage. Moreover, we are all labeled as recent "immigrants." *Hamilton* capitalizes on these reductive and racist ideologies with full force.

It is one thing when the character of Hamilton is played by Michael Luwoye who is the child of Nigerian immigrants, but when Hamilton is portrayed by Javier Muñoz or Lin Manuel-Miranda, Puerto Rican actors, it colors the meaning differently. Puerto Ricans in the role of Hamilton, and specifically non-Black Puerto Ricans, support the national narrative of what it looks like and means to be Latinx. This is further complicated by the fact that Puerto Ricans are not immigrants.

Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens whose heritage can be traced to the colony or "commonwealth" of Puerto Rico, including of course the Boricuas or individuals living on the island. Boricuas have been drafted into four American wars but not afforded many of the same constitutional rights of other U.S. citizens, such as the right to vote for the U.S. president (like the one who threw rolls of paper towels at my people while they were drowning). To watch a Puerto Rican cloaked in colonial garbs on "Independence Day" when Puerto Rico is still colonized is, to say the least, disheartening.

The idea is to use Latinxs to re-color what it means to be American by remixing the slogan, "we're a nation of immigrants," into the musical's iconic line, "Immigrants, we get the job done!" Not only does this narrative further erase Native Americans who are *native* to this land and thus country, but it doesn't even account for many Mexican Americans whose origins are from what's now California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas—the border crossed them. So not only is a significant portion of Latinxs not immigrants, but Hamilton himself hardly qualifies as one in the Ellis Island narrative sense (nor was he really an abolitionist, for that matter[ii]).

My curiosity of the messages being conveyed by *Hamilton* continues beyond anti-Blackness, erasure of Indigeneity, and whitewashing of Latinxs. Why can our Founding Fathers be reimagined as men of color, but not as women of color? Would it still be considered "revolutionary" if it were an all-Native cast? And what does it mean to have so many people of color performing for what has been predominantly wealthy white audiences?

Hamilton highlights the reality that people of color can be truly remarkable and can take center stage. That is imperative. Questioning the various power dynamics at play does not change the fact that *Hamilton* is an exceptional musical. But, as an audience, and especially as theater artists, we cannot simply observe without questioning. We must apply a critical lens, even during what is probably the best musical of our time. We must become artist-activists if we are to truly embrace this revolutionary moment in our industry.

Definitions

Definitions written in collaboration con mi hermana, Alma Villanueva.

Anti-Blackness: A form of racism with its historical roots in slavery that specifically targets Black people. While racism affects different races in different ways, anti-Blackness is the specific devaluation of Black life and the oppression of people of African descent. All **racialized** groups need to do more work on dismantling anti-Blackness, even within our own communities.

BIPOC: Stands for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. In the case of *Hamilton*, it is inaccurate to use the "I" as there does not appear to be any Indigenous peoples in the cast.

Color-Blind Casting: The concept of casting without considering a person's race. Nice idea, but it ain't really a thing.

Colorism: An anti-Black racist practice ingrained in every aspect of society in which individuals with lighter skin are more valued and treated more favorably than those with darker skin.

Erasure: Akin to "gaslighting," this is a practice of reorienting the narrative of an event or history in such a way as to diminish the significance or actual existence of people who were intricate to that event. The perspectives, lives, and histories of non-dominant groups are often erased through misrepresentation or from a complete lack of representation.

Implicit Bias: Prejudice or racism that is unconscious or not yet at a level of awareness.

Nontraditional Casting: Casting marginalized peoples in roles that do not specify race, gender, and/or ability as these roles have traditionally gone to those of the dominant culture.

Race: To conceptually group together people of often vastly different cultures within a singular category based on debunked pseudoscience that considered that diverse peoples shared innate biological, character, and moral traits. While race is a social construct with little to no biological merit, it remains as one of the dominant ways that people perceive others, shaping social relations and interactions.

Racialized: The ways in which people are consolidated into and treated as a racial category, even when they are not officially designated as a "race." For example, American Indians, who even as diverse sovereign nations and tribes, have been condensed into the singular category, "Native Americans." Similarly, Latinxs are considered an ethnicity by the U.S. Census, but we are treated as a monolithic group like other groups categorized as "races."

Whitewashing: To flatten differences within a racialized group by erasing that group's non-White heterogeneity. For instance, to portray Latinxs as a predominantly European people, which denies the group's historical and contemporary Indigenous and African ancestries and identities.

Works Referenced:

[i] López, Gustavo and Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana. "Afro-Latino: A deeply rooted identity among U.S. Hispanics." *Pew Research*. 1 March 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/01/afro-latino-a-deeply-rooted-identity-among-u-s-hispanics/. Accessed 5 July 2020.

[ii] Mineo, Liz. "Correcting 'Hamilton'." *The Harvard Gazette*. 7 October 2016, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/10/correcting-hamilton/. Accessed 4 July 2020.

https://minnesotaplaylist.com/magazine/article/2020/hamilton-anti-blackness-indigenous-erasure-and-whitewashing-latinxs