

Global Hip Hop Studies

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HAMILTON, LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA, THE PUBLIC THEATER, NEW YORK CITY, 20 JANUARY 2015

Reviewed by Brea M. Heidelberg

Hamilton, an original Broadway production created by Lin-Manuel Miranda, premiered in January 2015 and has been a topic of conversation among theatre-lovers and the general public ever since. The show, which is set in the years immediately preceding, during and after the American Revolution, tells the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of the so-called founding fathers who served as the first secretary of the treasury. The show blends musical styles including hip hop, R&B and jazz (think Fosse, not Coltrane) in ways that sparked interest among the hip hop community who then permeated the traditionally exclusive theatre realm. This cultural phenomenon prompted theatre attendance by rap stars like Busta Rhymes, Eminem and Questlove among many others. The interweaving of *Hamilton* into the hip hop world was solidified by the *Hamilton Mixtape* – a reimagining of the original cast album with features by Black Thought (front man of The Roots), Chance the Rapper, Common, Nas, Queen Latifah, Wiz Khalifa and others representing north-eastern and Chicago rap communities. Both the show and the mixtape enjoyed critical and popular success: *Hamilton* won eleven Tony Awards in 2016, including ‘Best Musical’, and *The Hamilton Mixtape* debuted at number one on the Billboard 200. The show brought mainstream audiences to an elitist Broadway and brought more non-hip hop fans to the producers and artists on the mixtape (Hurd 2016: n.pag.). The audience for *Hamilton* went even more mainstream when a recorded version of the musical landed on the Disney+ app on 4 July weekend in 2020. While Disney hasn’t released specific viewership numbers, the streaming version expands *Hamilton’s* audience exponentially, bringing Broadway to the people rather than making the people come to Broadway. For millions, the Disney+ version of *Hamilton* will be the definitive – and only – version of the musical that they will ever know.

One of the reasons behind *Hamilton’s* success is the multicultural cast and the presence of hip hop in a space known, and often criticized, for being purposefully, overwhelmingly white (Hoffman 2020). While there are many people who are either removed from, or only tangentially connected to the theatre world who enjoyed connecting with a musical, there are arguably just as many white, longstanding theatregoers who enjoyed that *Hamilton* gifted them with a cultural cache of enjoying something rooted in hip hop with a Black and Brown cast. Because this show interrogates the preponderance of white faces and voices in the history lessons we’re taught by asking, ‘who lives, who dies, who tells your story?’ it may mislead many into thinking that it is a complete interrogation of problematic histories and norms. However, *Hamilton* is an incomplete interrogation of whiteness because it

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employs colourist norms without calling them out or critiquing them. I argue that *Hamilton* reinforces problematic stereotypes through implicit messaging expressed through colourism and subtle anti-Blackness.

Colourism is the use of skin tone as a metric for discrimination and as a rationale for biased assumptions about behaviour (Marira and Mitra 2013: 103). Colourism can occur both interracially (e.g. a white person assuming that a Black person is engaging in criminal behaviour because they have a comparatively darker skin complexion) or intraracially (e.g. a Latinx individual assuming that another Latinx individual has a lower income because they have a darker, rather than lighter skin complexion). Colourism is a pervasive global phenomenon that privileges lighter skin over darker skin, regardless of country context (Glenn 2008). While much of the research into this form of bias has not yet separated colourism fully from racism (Marira and Mitra 2013), it is the intertwining of colourism and racism, specifically anti-blackness that I am interested in here. Colourism has been established as a subtle form of discrimination and bias that can better align with unquestioned social norms than overt racism (Harris 2008). I argue that this allows for the subtle reification of problematic racial stereotypes while avoiding charges of racist behaviour. The casting choices and character behaviours present in *Hamilton*, viewed through the concepts of colourism and anti-Blackness, present a subtle counternarrative to the overt multiculturalism that has been celebrated.

My analysis focuses on the cast of the original Broadway musical, since this is the cast of the film version available on Disney+. When casting a show, any number of circumstances (actor schedules, contractual negotiations, conflicting offers) can alter a creator's original conceptualization of the ideal cast. For example, Utkarsh Ambudkar, an Indian-American actor, rapper and singer was initially slated to take on the role of Aaron Burr, but had to step away from the project (Menta 2020). There are also a host of casting decisions that have and will continue to be made as the show runs in various cities throughout the United States. However, given the exorbitant ticket prices, which can range from \$199 to over \$850 (Passy 2019: n.pag.), the cast featured in the recorded version available on Disney+ will be the one seen by the most people. Therefore, despite the potential intent behind the various casting choices, the impact of the most prominent cast is important to consider.

In the *Hamilton* cast, there are three dominant dark-skinned actors: Okieriete Onaodowan who portrays Hercules Mulligan and James Madison, Renée Elise Goldsberry who plays Angelica Schuyler, and Leslie Odom, Jr who plays Aaron Burr. Despite less overall time onstage than the other two dark-skinned actors, Okieriete Onaodowan, a dark-skinned Nigerian-American actor, who portrays Hercules Mulligan and James Madison, demonstrates traits that align him with colourist and racist tropes. As Hercules Mulligan, his hypersexualized lyrics in the early bar scene where Hamilton and his revolutionary friends are first introduced align with the lecherous brute stereotype, known for being innately savage sexual predators:

I am Hercules Mulligan
Up in it, lovin' it, yes I heard ya mother said 'Come again?'
Lock up ya daughters and horses, of course
It's hard to have intercourse over four sets of corsets.

(Pilgrim 2020: n.pag.)

While this kind of bravado is common in hip hop, it does stand out among the rest of the introductions which focused on rationales for revolutionary thinking and the ways the other characters planned on fighting for various types of freedom.

Angelica Schuyler, played by Renée Elise Goldsberry (a mid, deep-toned Black woman) demonstrates the strong Black woman stereotype throughout the show, with the most prominent example being connecting her sister Eliza with Hamilton early in the first act. Angelica's selflessness in favour of her sister Eliza's interest in Hamilton, who Angelica also cares for, is explained as sisterly affection. However, the optics of Angelica stepping aside for Eliza, played by Chinese-American actress Phillipa Soo, align Angelica with the harmful stereotype of the strong Black woman, a perception that Black women are 'naturally strong, resilient, self-contained, and self-sacrificing', which has been shown to negatively impact the way Black women, especially darker-skinned Black women, are treated and the way they cope with daily stressors (Donovan and West 2014: 384). Through the show's narrative structure, a lighter-skinned woman is placed in the role of not only desirable but acceptable, at the expense of a darker-skinned woman. While both Black and Chinese-American women have overt forms of racism to contend with, here they are pitted against each other because Hamilton can only choose one of them to marry. The visual of who is deferring to whom mirrors real life, where someone with Soo's background and skin tone would most likely be put ahead of Goldsberry in the racial and skin tone hierarchies we see play out with wages (National Partnership for Women and Families 2020), health outcomes (Williams 2002), and in the many ways that anti-Blackness and colourism play out in everyday interactions. *Hamilton* has clearly established itself as the kind of space where overt racism isn't welcomed however, colourism, as a more nuanced form of bias, occurs without acknowledgement. It is colourism that creates disparate outcomes for both women, signalling a *de facto* reification of a hierarchy based on skin tone since the show does the work of overtly signalling what can or should be interrogated about societal and cultural norms in other ways.

Leslie Odom Jr, a dark-skinned Black man, plays Aaron Burr, the title character's foil. Burr's actions are viewed in contrast to Hamilton's throughout the show but are particularly tragic when viewed through colourism. When Burr and Hamilton first meet, Burr cautions Hamilton to 'talk less, smile more', a pre-emptive protective measure employed by many Black men who experience stereotype threat – where concern over confirming negative stereotypes can cause excessive worry, depression and decreased task performance (Steele and Aronson 1995). Hamilton, played by Lin-Manuel Miranda who is a light-skinned Puerto Rican, spends most of his interactions with Burr trying to get him to go against all of the carefully constructed protective tactics that Burr tries to share with Hamilton during their first meeting. Rereading the optics of these interactions through a racial and colourist lens, Hamilton has privilege as a non-Black POC but doesn't fully understand how that privilege works. This is demonstrated by Hamilton's repeated attempts to get the dark-skinned Burr to act as the non-Black Hamilton does.

Despite continued goading from Hamilton, Burr knows that he must not 'let them know what you're for and what you're against' and that he must 'wait for it'. Burr demonstrates an understanding of the racialized double standard that many Black people experience in the workplace when it comes to rules regarding emotional displays (Wingfield 2010). The emotions found acceptable

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when displayed by white people and those with lighter skin are often grounds for subtle forms of punishment and negative reinforcement when displayed by Black people and those with darker skin. Hamilton seems naïve about the potential consequences for Burr and is unsympathetic, judgemental and ultimately antagonistic as a result of his lack of understanding.

Although Burr appears to understand and conform to many of the unwritten rules that govern the lives of Black and dark-skinned people, the constant dismissal from 'the room where it happens' eventually takes its toll, as racialized battle fatigue often does (Smith et al. 2011). After seeing slow, but steady progress towards political success throughout the show, Burr is frustrated when Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison go into a secret meeting and emerge having determined the symbolic and geographic location of the nation's capital and the country's financial system. Burr, speaking to Hamilton on his way into the meeting and Jefferson on his way out of it, realizes that he has made enough progress to be included in the political system as a senator – but still lacked the power to be in the room where the real and important decisions are made. 'The Room Where It Happens' details Burr's frustration, dismay and eventual resolve to gain access. It is after this number in the second act where Burr begins to let go of the safety precautions ingrained in him seemingly from birth. Burr succumbs to the tactics that Hamilton employed throughout the entirety of the show, but without the skin tone privilege that Hamilton enjoys. Later, Burr openly campaigns to become president, noting that he was taking a cue from Hamilton's penchant to actively and loudly pursue what he wants. We later learn that, as a result of his choice to campaign against Jefferson, Burr is barred from becoming vice president when Jefferson wins the presidency. The visual message is that Burr's downfall comes when he forgets his place, which is *not* in the room where it happens.

Because *Hamilton* was designed to be 'colour-blind', but was not designed to account for the implicit messaging that the show presents through its casting choices, colourism still exists. This is the result of the difference between colour-blind casting and colour-conscious casting. The former is designed to remove race from consideration when casting, while the latter factors race directly into the casting decision-making process (Hopkins 2018: 133–34). The distinction between these two ways of casting has significant implications for how both inclusivity and equity may be achieved. There is an element of inclusivity achieved by colour-blind casting, it is important that we see POC on the stage. However, *Hamilton's* lack of colour-conscious casting, viewed through the lens of colourism, highlights the actions of each character in ways that add another layer of meaning. Because it does not acknowledge or critique the colourism I describe here, Disney+'s *Hamilton* reinforces rather than challenges long-standing anti-Black ideas that disproportionately affect dark-skinned people. The multicultural cast also reinforces internalized colourism and self-policing within POC communities.

Theatres looking to advance their equity work in response to nationwide calls for accountability stemming from Asian-American, Black and Latinx actors, playwrights, directors and theatre managers have come to understand that colour-blind decision-making often causes harm such as actors of colour not being cast because they didn't look *ethnic* enough and white actors seeking roles designed specifically for POC (Pao 2010). A push towards colour conscious casting has brought with it a deeper understanding of the pernicious nature that visual reinforcement of colour-based stereotyping can have. Jeyamoorthy (2017: n.pag.) states that 'artists need to be aware of what

narrative they're spinning and whether or not it's racially insensitive'. I echo those words of caution here. I am not arguing for casting that solely considers colourism, that is a slippery slope that could have the same negative consequences Nikole Hannah-Jones notes in the 'curated diversity' seen in many schools and offices today (Douglas 2017: n.pag.). Instead, I call for casting that is mindful of its own optics and works to have the same kind of wink and nod commentary, if not outright calling out, that Miranda gives to immigrant status and socio-economic status.

Given the many failed attempts at racial equity that have occurred across sectors (including theatre) throughout the last decade, the highly visible parade of diversity in *Hamilton* is the kind of collective moment people tend to be self-congratulatory about. But a true understanding of, and reckoning with, the ways that colourism is still present among a cast as racially and ethnically diverse as the one represented in *Hamilton* is necessary if we are to move from diversity to inclusion and equity.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8805-2424>