

# “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?”: Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*

Emma Charlotte Weiher  
Philipps University of Marburg, Germany

**Abstract:** With its recent addition to the streaming service Disney+, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s 2015 Broadway production *Hamilton: An American Musical* has once again entered cultural discourse. While lauded for its appraisal of Alexander Hamilton’s life as an immigrant’s story and as a revisualization and presumed reclamation of America’s past through the lens of an almost exclusively nonwhite cast and group of creators, the musical has also been subject to criticism. Early critics aptly categorized it as another component of Founders Chic and questioned its presumed progressive stance on history-writing in the face of its veneration of the Founding Fathers. The following paper aims to discern the musical’s awareness of its position within history through the analysis of relevant lyrics and rhetorical devices. *Hamilton* is thus presented as a piece of history-writing aware of the process of historical reenvisioning, carefully and individually established through its respective generational, political, and sociological ideals and identity.

Mainstream media consumption has recently been enriched by a renewed interest in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Broadway production *Hamilton: An American Musical* after its distribution on digital streaming services. The 2015 musical phenomenon follows the continuing trend of cultural and creative “veneration of the Founding and Founding Fathers” (Brown, “*Hamilton*” 485). This appraisal has carefully framed the Founding Fathers as figures embodying ideals synonymous with the American experience and identity, namely independence, liberty, and individualism (489). In addition to its exploration (and arguably, its glorification) of the Fathers, *Hamilton* evokes the romanticized rags-

to-riches story of Horatio Alger Jr., American exceptionalism, and the immigrant's perspective as a basis of American history (495).

While lauded for this progressive reframing of the Founding as an immigrant's success story, *Hamilton* has also been severely criticized for its 'race-conscious' casting, which, according to historian and scholar of American studies Lyra D. Monteiro, merely complies with "another rendition of the 'exclusive past,' with its focus on the deeds of 'great white men'" (90). As opposed to this early criticism in academic discourse, a predominating motif within the musical that ought to be praised but has largely been overlooked is the inclusion of historical documentation in the form of original phrasing as well as the act of writing history (Monteiro 91). Defined as "a musical about making history," expressed in the vernacular of early-twenty-first-century American popular culture, *Hamilton* still caters to an already "endlessly malleable mythology" (Harbert 425; Brown, "Founding" 495). The following chapters will further expand on Harbert's description of the musical as possessing "self-aware theatricality" (426). Through this quality, *Hamilton* joins the dialogue of Founders Chic with a constructed awareness of its position within the creative and literary process of history-writing.

The musical was inspired by Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton and written by American songwriter and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda, who was born to Puerto Rican parents. It traces the political and private life of its titular character from his arrival in the American colonies to his participation in the Revolutionary War and its political aftermath and finally to his fatal duel with his lifelong rival Aaron Burr. While, at its beginning, the musical is largely narrated through the perspectives of Hamilton and Burr, its narrative position shifts later on to focalize the character of Elizabeth Schuyler, Hamilton's wife. She is included as a proponent of Republican Motherhood and is (partly) allowed to express her experience of the domestic, private sphere of American history. This deliberate change in narrative autonomy subverts the male-dominated and whitewashed history of the founding of America, as continued in the phenomenon of Founders Chic, and affirms the inclusion of previously marginalized voices, effectively positioning *Hamilton* beyond the narrative paradigms of Founders Chic. In this paper, I argue that despite its perpetuation of Founders Chic, the musical still rejects and subverts key paradigms of the phenomenon's historiography through the voices of minor characters such as Elizabeth Schuyler.

## **"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?": Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton***

This paper will first examine Miranda's musical as a conscious participant in the Founders Chic genre and its perpetuation of the Founders' veneration. The first chapter will also take into consideration numerous points of criticism that have been raised by historians and other academics such as Monteiro and Ishmael Reed. While early criticism has largely focused on the musical's race-conscious casting and endorsement of white American history, it has partly neglected *Hamilton's* deliberate use of narrativity, particularly in terms of its relation to history and historiography. It is this motif of conscious narrativity and self-aware storytelling and performance that will be the explicit focus of the last chapters. As the character of Elizabeth Schuyler incorporates this aspect most overtly in her performance, with added emphasis and layers found in the recorded stage performance on Disney+, her key musical pieces will comprise the main focus of the final analysis.

### **FOUNDERS CHIC IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

The introduction of Founders Chic into the popular narration of American history affirms a widespread glorification of the story of the nation's founding. Despite its application to more recent publications within academic and nonacademic discourses, the phenomenon began as early as the moment of the Founding itself. Thus, its historiography dates back as far as its contemporaries and has always been as widely reevaluated, reformulated, and criticized as it is today (Brands). Early criticism of the Fathers appeared in the early nineteenth century as political and societal shortcomings within the Constitution—such as the Fathers' failure to restrict and oppose slavery—became more acute in the face of the political shifts during that period. A similarly progressive attitude evolved into the earliest revisionist publications, such as Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), but did not significantly dampen the Founders myth until the history-writing of the 1960s and '70s sought to divest itself of its glorification of white men.

In its current form, Founders Chic offers an affirmation of America's historical roots, national identity, and an almost reactionary popularization of its key white male figures, against the backdrop of academic trends that have sought to include marginalized voices (Waldstreicher 186). The literary trend's most prominent publications include Joseph J. Ellis's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Founding Brothers*

(2000), David McCullough's *John Adams* (2001), and H. W. Brands's *The First American* (2000).

The Founders Chic of the early twenty-first century could thus be described as a blatantly patriotic and glorifying reception of the Founding Fathers' legacy and appears to be widely accepted as a piece of American "hagiography," a category *Hamilton* could also fall into (Owen). And yet, the musical aims at a revisionist historiography in the spirit of presenting a complete, accurate, and inclusive history, which has been the program of numerous historians (Waldstreicher 186). With this in mind, the musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda appears to acknowledge the potential of rewriting a presumably fixed version of American history following recent academic trends—as expressed in the character of Elizabeth Schuyler—while still abiding by the affirmative rhetoric of Founders Chic. The crux of *Hamilton*'s revisionist attempt lies in the inclusion of a contemporary cultural spirit, including its identity politics, into the nation's founding ideals.

### *Hamilton* in the Context of Founders Chic

With its first public staging during the early twenty-first century, *Hamilton* appears alongside a line of works dedicated to revisiting the Founding Fathers of America. The underlying sentiment within this phenomenon lies in the reverence of the Founders and their formulation as relatable and humanized versions of their historical selves. This cultural rebirth seeks to find qualities worthy of praise in the construction of the Founders' characters, much to the chagrin of critic and writer H. W. Brands, who fears the consequences of such a practice: By glorifying a historical past, contemporary consumers risk undervaluing the merits of the present (101). This is not, however, an entirely new development of the twenty-first century, but rather the continuation of a trend that elevates figures of American history to the heights of national myth. The emergence of Founders Chic and its reconstructed story of the Founding both exposes the values given to the past and coordinates which aspects are to be venerated and which are to be vilified in the present. The cultural and primarily literary phenomenon of Founders Chic is rooted in the myth of American exceptionalism, a sentiment rampant in the reverence of the Founding Fathers.

Even critics of the Chic phenomenon allow for a degree of admiration and praise for the canonized Founding Fathers, all of whom—in their perceived unity—

**"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?": Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton***

exhibit qualities worthy of emulation (Brands). This boils down to a sense of enlightened origin that would foretell an even more enlightened future and legitimize a nation's imperial influence. Such a treatment of history must be, without question, dissected and critiqued.

Revising and rewriting the Founders, even within the genre of Founders Chic, has taken many guises. Any revisiting—and thus reformulation—of a particular past is written within its contemporary social, political, and cultural field (e.g., its development during the 1960s). In this regard, and especially in the immediate context of today's mixed media landscape, *Hamilton* may appear to be a historical fan fiction that consciously ascribes its own sociopolitical tenets onto a mythological, canonical past (Kustritz 147). In the tradition of historical musicals, *Hamilton* does not only deal with history, but rather presents a culturally influenced commentary on it (Harbert 414).

Apart from the musical and the biography by Ron Chernow that it is largely based upon, the historiography presented by *Hamilton* bridges academic and nonacademic discourse. Its source, in the form of a biography, was published as a piece of popular media within the Chic phenomenon and thus already undermines a solely academic approach to the musical, as historians have also neglected to take a closer look at *Hamilton's* practical economic policies (Hogeland 37). Alexander Hamilton's historiographic position, however, becomes more malleable if one considers earlier appropriations and appraisals of his character—namely an originally conservative standpoint which lauded his valuing of the federal government (21). This effectively presents a shift in the historiography of Hamilton's character and exposes the subjectivity of any pieces of media published under the guise of Founders Chic.

Undoubtedly, the phenomenon thus bears traits of conscious idealization and glorification. Faced with this construction, readers discover a past version of their nation that seems to bear no immediate resemblance to their experienced present. The ever-changing and malleable adaptability of the Founding's history in political terms is also discussed by Brands, who highlights the notion of intellectual degeneration and generational decline. These positions presuppose the covert narrative of generational and historical degeneracy, an idea that is more often picked up by nationalist and right-wing sympathizers who see the revision of history in the name of a more accurate and inclusive rendering of a nation's past as a threat to a predominantly white male hegemony. While *Hamilton* certainly

glamorizes this vision of the United States' beginnings, it also celebrates its continuation and presence within contemporary America and thus reaffirms a new historiography that is formulated decidedly against the conservative appraisal.

### *Hamilton* as Revisionist Founders Chic

Yet how critical and revisionist is *Hamilton*? At the forefront of *Hamilton*'s early critics stands Lyra D. Monteiro. Soon after *Hamilton*'s first performance on Broadway in New York, she categorized it as a perpetuation of Founders Chic. At the core of Monteiro's argument—and the primary issue of numerous critics after her—has been the race-conscious casting of the historically white Founding Fathers by mostly nonwhite actors as well as the musical's missing confrontation with the institution of slavery. This notion could be coupled with the assessment of *Hamilton* as a piece of “liberal identity politics” that still revels in national pride (Gentry 272). In its liberal worldview, the musical supposedly shifts “the hagiographic revelry” in order to focus on characters that can be paraphrased to embody seemingly progressive attitudes (Brown, “Founding” 494).

Still, the shortcomings of the musical's presumably liberal stance become apparent in numerous key scenes: When both Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton intone their hopes of “lay[ing] a strong enough foundation” to pass onto their children, the musical praises and legitimizes their legacy without calling into question who has benefited from the foundational myth that *Hamilton*'s Burr and Hamilton aim to build (“Dear Theodosia”). The accusation of hagiography by Brown might at this point be applicable to a certain degree, as *Hamilton*—especially in its characterization of Burr and Hamilton—presents an answer to the moral shades of gray of the historically venerated Fathers. While the musical still focuses on history's known white protagonists, it ultimately encapsulates contemporary narratives that are told, retold, and categorized in the frame of Founding history. The question remains if the musical can prove its point beyond a mere aesthetics of representation and historical diversity (Brown, “Founding” 494). The eradication of unfavorable qualities of the past, revised through modern eyes, would then still align with the appraisal of a ‘historic ideal’ embodied by the Founders—an ideal to which *Hamilton* still caters. In the attempt to sideline documented and systemic injustices, performed by selected historical figures, the musical might fall victim to a performative “aestheticization of the historical” (Cronin qtd. in Keyes). This

**“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?”: Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton***

discussion appears similar to the discourse surrounding the removal of statues commemorating historical American figures—do they stand as mere aesthetic products of the past or should they be discarded as firm symbols of historical oppression and hate?

In essence, the criticism noted by Elizabeth Keyes, as well as others referenced by her, lies not just in the casting of Black actors for the main characters but in *Hamilton*’s refusal to acknowledge historical figures of color who contributed to the revolutionary fight (cf. Monteiro 93). Mentions of historical Black participants and characters living during the war are relegated to the fringes of the main action—all in favor of reiterating praiseworthy history written by and about its white protagonists (94). Thus, the historical documentation of nonwhite participation in the Founding’s narrative—such as the crucial oversight of Hercules Mulligan’s slave, Cato, known for his assistance in spying on the opposing British army—is largely absent (95).

The musical is visually and tonally dominated by nonwhite performances, in accordance with what Alex Nichols has termed “representational diversity” (qtd. in Keyes). In this regard, *Hamilton* follows the sensationalist and humanizing characteristics of Founders Chic. In its idealistic framework and patriotic idealism, *Hamilton* “reenvisions what it means to be American” by positioning its Black and brown bodies as avatars of history in a visual dichotomy that highlights the contrast of dominant bodies in past and present American politics and society (“Resurged” 00:00:59; cf. Monteiro 96). The musical thus opts for an aesthetics of representation in the name of diversity—a decidedly liberal mindset that allows for its neat categorization as Founders Chic and a moderate yet visually subversive historiography.

In addition to neglecting the participation of Black Americans in the war effort, the musical, much in line with Founders Chic, sidelines the Founders’ involvement in slavery. While *Hamilton* deliberately mentions slavery in the opening number, most of it is exclusively related to Alexander Hamilton’s actions against it. The Founders’ “essays against slavery”—as well as Eliza’s act of “speak[ing] out against slavery” in her deceased husband’s name—carefully constructs a picture of the sympathetic characters as being exclusively opposed to the racialized and racist institution (e.g., “Stay Alive,” “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”). The inclusion of slavery thus transpires, again, in favor of historically white figures (Onion). *Hamilton*’s ultimate and inevitable failing point in this revisionist telling,

then, is the failure to confront ineradicable written history. The critic Rebecca Onion even formulates the casting choices as an attempt to appease a contemporary, racially conscious, and supposedly enlightened audience.

In essence, the musical speaks in the cadence of the traditionalist Founders Chic while aiming to address it in a performative revision of history-writing. With all its good intentions, such a race-conscious revisualization of history falters in the face of current political leadership and the continuous vilification and demonization of civil rights activism. Even in the wake of the widespread and international popularization of the Black Lives Matter movement—as witnessed in the summer of 2020—the shortcomings of performative activism become increasingly evident in the face of missing systemic changes. Still, *Hamilton* and its legacy—most prominently continued through its cast and creators—participate in a decidedly political discourse. Video performances and numerous posts on social media by the cast and crew during the weeks leading up to the 2020 presidential election and continuing well into the Georgia Senate run-offs in January 2021 have established the musical's firm political position and identification (e.g., "*Hamilton* X When We All Vote"; "Original *Hamilton* Cast Reunion").

With its popularization of immigrants' and minorities' issues on the musical stage, *Hamilton* introduces a shift in the "popular discussion of the American Revolution in a more progressive direction" while prioritizing the Founders Chic paradigm (Owen). Accordingly, *Hamilton* still affirms the celebration of American history but allows for space of revision. For instance, the character of Thomas Jefferson is introduced by the sympathetic pseudo-narrator Aaron Burr at the show's half point. He sets the stage for Jefferson's flamboyant entrance, performed by Daveed Diggs to critical acclaim. Burr carefully reiterates the glories previously performed by Hamilton and Washington, as "ev'ry American experiment sets a precedent" until "someone came along to resist him" ("What'd I Miss"). Diggs's acclaimed performance of a known slaveholder encapsulates the visual and idealistic "de-victimization of American identity" which aims to refigure Black Americans as "fellow recipients of the rights and identity on which America was founded" ("Resurged" 00:05:05). All of this, however, glosses over the fact that Black Americans did not, in fact, receive those rights. The racial policies that color the founding of America are neglected in the face of a contemporary revisualization of its ideals in a progressive light. While the musical may "exemplif[y] the vitality and

## **"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?": Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton***

synthesis at the core of America's formation," it is still largely idealistic and embodies the desired, rather than the actual, American identity (00:06:30).

Therefore, *Hamilton* warrants acute criticism, as any performance of American history that impacts its contemporary cultural landscape is bound to influence conversations surrounding crucial societal issues (Gentry 277). This is particularly striking during times dominated by cultural shifts and unrest, acutely felt in pro-immigration and refugee protests as well as in the Black Lives Matter movement and Women's Marches (Martinez). The musical's most prominent politically idealistic stances are rightfully acknowledged as empowering mantras and appropriated for use in activism. It is in these uses that revisionist history brings forth most changes of both individual and collective attitudes. The explicit influence that *Hamilton's* lyrics hold over current political activism is evident through its continuous presence within protests in the form of slogans, adapted protest signs, and rephrased songs from the musical as well as through the cast and crew's ongoing political awareness on social media ("Chained and Shot").

### **HAMILTON'S NARRATIVE AWARENESS**

In addition to its reappraisal of American myths through race-consciousness and its celebration of immigration, *Hamilton* deals with American history through its awareness of narration. The musical's dominant motif lies in "the power of words," a motif that ultimately aims to reject previous paradigms of the historiography surrounding the Founding Fathers ("What Is *Hamilton*" 00:04:38). For one, this motif is expressed in Alexander Hamilton's fervent productivity to further his status and construct his legacy. Apart from Hamilton's motivation to tell his story, I would like to redirect the focus on the construction of the Founding Fathers' history toward that formulated by side characters, future generations, and contemporary writers. The key narrators of Hamilton's (rewritten) life comprise Aaron Burr, Elizabeth Schuyler, and, to a lesser extent, George Washington. These characters most prominently disclose Miranda's rewriting of a *grand récit* in the context of contemporary rhetoric and media, as has been explored in the previous chapters. In addition to this stands the musical's awareness of its own position within history-writing, as the characters themselves address their responsibilities and roles within history. In particular, the character of Elizabeth ("Eliza") Schuyler presents an overt subversion and rejection of the history-writing prevalent within

the Founders Chic phenomenon and expresses the musical's key transgression of its presumed label and categorization.

### "I Put Myself Back in the Narrative": Rewriting and Reframing

Rewriting and reframing are both neutral terms that do not immediately pertain to a positive or progressive reclamation of a past good. The act merely comprises the telling of a known history, adapted to address a selected motif, belief, or ideology. Its aim is "not to lose that initial historical record" but rather to introduce perspectives and meaningful layers into a story in order to expand a historical canon (Gentry 273).

*Hamilton's* act of rewriting has been highly problematized since its first performance in 2015. African American author Ishmael Reed has highlighted the shifting power dynamics inherent in the language of the musical, as it now appropriates the language of minorities in order to "romanticize the careers of kidnapers, and murderers." Such a critical focus, however, neglects the musical's acutely felt ability to "transform [...] conceptions of race in cultural memory" and in the present (Harbert 420).

The musical explicitly deals with the question of who is granted the power and means to narrate and answers it through its casting and striking visuality. In the cases of Burr and Eliza, historical side characters ultimately wield the pen in writing Hamilton's legacy. Miranda's lyrics pertaining to issues of historical significance and legacy tend to resort to rhetorical questions that are acutely self-aware. When Alexander Hamilton ponders "if this bullet is [his] legacy," he already recognizes the inherent fallacy prompting this question: While he is allowed to plant "seeds in a garden [he] never get[s] to see," his words are "the beginning of a song someone will sing for [him]" ("The World Was Wide Enough"). At this moment, the musical affirms this conjecture, as its concluding narrative has been written and performed exclusively by figures outside of Alexander Hamilton's immediate context and time. His history has already been placed in the hands of the America that comes after him.

The reclamation of underrepresented groups during Hamilton's lifetime—namely the situation of white American women—is addressed through the characters of Angelica, Eliza, and Peggy. In their opening number, the Schuyler

**"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?": Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton***

sisters proclaim that "history is happening in Manhattan" when in reality they are being expelled from that history ("The Schuyler Sisters"). Angelica herself is aware of this yet persists in her glorification of the immediate political developments. Only a few lines into the piece, she sardonically bemoans the fact of women's disenfranchisement as she has "been reading *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine / So men say that [she's] intense or [she's] insane" ("The Schuyler Sisters"). She exhibits a contemporary comprehension of women's historical underrepresentation within American politics, thus speaking directly to the beliefs entertained by a majority of the enraptured audience.

Angelica seeks a revelation that would see women become active political agents. In her desire "to include women in the sequel" of the Declaration of Independence, she echoes the sentiment of eighteenth-century female authors writing against the domestic disenfranchisement of their gender ("The Schuyler Sisters"). Angelica's acute desire to be involved in the political maneuvers of the early Republic, therefore, is an ambition reminiscent of members of the later women's suffrage movement such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, rather than those of Republican Motherhood as exhibited, for instance, by Abigail Adams. At this point in the musical's plot, men still determine the position of women within the political apparatus of the state as well as the societal values attributed to them. It is only at the very end of the show that a female character, Eliza, is actively engaged in the act of history-writing.

Before this can happen, however, she remains within the frame of domesticity, marriage, childbirth, and motherhood—all adhering to the core tenets of Republican Motherhood. It is her plea "to send [Hamilton] home" during pregnancy that ultimately forces him to (briefly) abandon the masculine sphere of the battlefield and war, a disruption that is all too keenly felt in the tonal shift of the musical arrangements ("That Would Be Enough"). Her feminine, domestic position remains opposed to the fast-paced rhythms and beats of the masculine, political sphere. More explicitly, her main ballads ("Helpless," "That Would Be Enough," "Burn") strictly confine her to the roles of dutiful daughter and wife (two roles which she manages to change within a single song), (grieving) mother, betrayed wife, and, eventually, widow. Except for her introductory lines in "The Schuyler Sisters," Eliza rarely comments on her husband's politics or the nation's affairs more generally, as she is satisfied with being the "Best of Wives and Best of

Women”—until, that is, the death of her husband thrusts her upon the historical stage.

Another character who is given the authority to tell their story from the fringes of history is the self-proclaimed villain, Aaron Burr. As the musical positions Burr as an ideological antagonist to Hamilton, it allows him to unearth his “redeeming qualities,” another answer to a tendency of Founders Chic to be “either insanely defensive of him or vilif[ying] him” (Rose 00:00:25). Miranda’s musical thus opts for a conscious humanization of its leading historical figures, in line with its formulaic adherence to Founders Chic. Other characters wield the pen of Alexander Hamilton’s legacy as early as the musical’s introduction of Hamilton through the words of Aaron Burr. He positions himself as a retrospective, omniscient narrator at the beginning of the musical, delineating the progress of Hamilton’s life from bastardy to scholarly pursuits. In the musical’s first piece of music, “Alexander Hamilton,” the characters of Aaron Burr, John Laurens, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, as well as the Schuyler sisters and Maria Reynolds perform as narrating powers over the titular character’s story.

Burr’s narrative authority continues throughout the musical and culminates in his perspective of Hamilton’s entrance and exit in the aftermath of their fateful duel, as seen in “The World Was Wide Enough.” In this key scene, *Hamilton* positions itself as an authority on historical accuracy, with Burr as the historically self-aware narrator. He speaks directly to future generations when he criticizes the syllabus of American history classes (“they won’t teach you this in your classes”) and is retrospectively aware of the impact of this moment insofar as “the world will never be the same.” Here, Burr figures mostly as the narrative authority on Hamilton’s legacy. The very same piece, however, also addresses his own position within that legacy, one he now loses control over: “History obliterates and in every picture it paints me in all my mistakes” (“The World Was Wide Enough”). Narrative authority is taken from him at the point of self-recognition.

At this point, once Burr relinquishes his claim on narrative historical authority, Eliza evolves as another significant narrator by effectively “using her voice to curate and tell the story” and putting herself back in the narrative (“What Is *Hamilton*” 00:19:19). These final notes are key to the overall formulation of the musical’s politics of history-writing. As a character who has hitherto been consigned to the role of domestic peacekeeper and embodiment of Republican Motherhood, Eliza rightfully “claims her share of the musical’s title,” by firmly planting the

## **"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?": Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton***

significance and authority of her own role within its telling and legacy. The question of "who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" is answered in a reversal of gendered narrative optics in which the audience is forced to reconsider the intricate processes of historical legacies and the shifting hegemony of its telling (Harbert 425).

Such a shift in narrative hegemony must still be viewed outside of *Hamilton's* idealistic stance. The characters who are depicted as being concerned with their own legacy and position within history are, after all, those belonging to a privileged portion of a young nation. It is only through the framing of Miranda's musical as a positive and optimistic immigrant story that the United States' founding story can speak to an idealized vision of a multicultural and multiethnic political stage.

### **"Are You Aware That We're Making History?": Conscious Narrativity**

Miranda's musical firmly positions itself as an active and self-aware piece of history-writing. It corresponds to what has been termed a "*repertoire*—the performances that are repeated and recycled *beyond* what is preserved in the written record, and that these performances are equally vital in interrogating history" (Nathans 274). The repetition of "who lives, who dies, who tells your story," begun by George Washington and later embodied by Eliza and Hamilton, "brings its history explicitly into the present" and highlights the musical's awareness of its own authority in the telling of the myth of the Founding Fathers (Harbert 417). Through constant reiteration of this statement, coupled with its performance through the actors on stage, the musical directly positions itself as a means of "tell[ing] [their] story."

Both characters, however, are not the only ones concerned with this process, as Alexander Hamilton's ambitions evolve into his desire to "build something that's gonna outlive [him]" ("The Room Where It Happens"). As early as the first notes of "The Story of Tonight," the characters are concerned with the legacy of the political stage of the early Republic. Its historical significance is not ignored by its actors, either, as Hamilton asks the "gentlemen of the jury [...]" [whether they] are [...] aware that [they]'re making history?" ("Non-Stop"). In this case, history is actively made and performed at the Constitutional Convention, and its significance is felt at the moment of its inception. Throughout most of the musical, the

responsibility of story-writing lies strictly within the (male) realms of politics and warfare.

This introduces the key theme of the show's second half: The values that are granted to historical moments are ultimately subject to the respective era's productivity and exceptionalism. The historical actors are already being measured by history, without yet having been made into history. When Aaron Burr narrates the process of writing the Federalist Papers, he explicitly praises Hamilton's productivity, especially in its contrast to his fellow authors ("Non-Stop"). *Hamilton's* focus on Alexander Hamilton's industrious nature proves that productivity is seen and valued as the key to American success. At a later stage of the song, Washington's mantra "history has its eyes on you" is echoed in the voices of the ensemble, recalling the significance of written documentation and production in the process of history-making. Hamilton, similarly, "fight[s] like history has its eyes on [him]" ("Non-Stop"). Any actions are thus directly measured by the value history and thus future generations will likely grant them. *Hamilton* therefore functions "as a meta-narrative" that allows for inaccuracies and actively reformulates a historical canon for the sake of an idealized American identity that would see each figure striving for a spot in history's good book ("Wishful Idealism" 00:10:37). Likewise, the key actors of the Revolution are concerned with the longevity of their actions, wondering: "And? If we win our independence? Is that a guarantee of freedom for our descendants?" ("My Shot").

Next to Alexander Hamilton, the characters who are most acutely aware of the significance of their actions in the name of history are Aaron Burr, George Washington, and Elizabeth Schuyler. Their concern with history directly echoes their position within it: Their story is one of eventual political control and power, as well as status, which directly affirms the notion that history is written by those who wield power. In contrast to Alexander Hamilton, who is obsessed with writing and curating his own archive and documentation, Washington proves his maturity when retiring as President in "One Last Time." He knows that "the nation [...] outlives [him] when [he is] gone" and that "they'll be safe in the nation we've made." This song in particular, given its decidedly affirmative stance on the presidential system, comments directly on Barack Obama's presidency. The song was part of a live performance by the original cast in the White House and culminated a repertoire that actively frames Obama's presidency within (white)

**“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?”: Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton***

American history and the presumed legitimacy and generosity of George Washington’s presidential legacy (Lewis 48).

In contrast to Washington’s embodiment of the exclusively male sphere of early American politics, the character of Elizabeth Schuyler is positioned as the domestic caretaker and the embodiment of Republican Motherhood. She begins the musical as wife to an industrious and ambitious Founder, convinced that they “don’t need a legacy” and thus uninterested in history. Her presumed role in “the narrative, in the story they will write someday” is constricted (by herself, as well as history) to the domestic sphere (“That Would Be Enough”). She is content to stay within her role and thereby be neglected by a greater history that she sees Hamilton as being a part of. In a hopeful and idealistic plea, she envisions a story “where [Hamilton] decide[s] to stay [...] and [they] could be enough” (“That Would Be Enough”). Remarkably, even Hamilton is willing to exclude her from his own legacy as he prefers laying the foundations for his son rather than participate actively in his upbringing or include Eliza in his history-writing (“Dear Theodosia”).

It is precisely in this role of a historically silenced and consciously voiceless Republican wife that Eliza eventually “eras[es] [her]self from the narrative” in her ballad “Burn,” positioning herself as a foil to Washington’s historically minded actions. With earnest and bitter gravitas, she is willing to “let future historians wonder” about her reaction and authorizes the absence of records pertaining to her own person within history. Eliza effectively addresses the question of who has the rights to history, or to an individual story, for that matter. Her musical piece equates historians with the future world that “has no right to [her] heart and [...] [does not] get to know what [she] said” (“Burn”). This deliberately denies the view of history as a democratization of knowledge that must be publicly available to and assessable by anyone.

This scene also speaks to the unavoidable representation of an inaccurate or incomplete history present in the phenomenon of Founders Chic (Madison 57). With its direct citation of archival material and documents, *Hamilton* frames history as a physical trace that is at times more eloquent in its missing documents than in its existing ones. Eliza’s burning of potentially archival material visualizes the musical’s thesis that even revisionist history-writing can never include the full and accurate scope of the missing archival material (67). Up until this point, Eliza’s embodiment of Republican Motherhood has been presented as purely domestic. Along the lines of this gendered ideal, her figure is concerned with the moral

support of her husband and the education of her children—a historical role that she here begins to resent and wishes to destroy.

In this scene, Miranda frames an instance of a lack of documentation as the consequence of an active intrusion by a female character, when many of history's missing stories can be attributed to conscious eradication, dismissal, and exclusion on the part of their respective dominant culture. Cases of active removal and exclusion of historical female figures can, for example, be found in medical history and biblical studies (cf. Owens; King). Miranda's imaginary explanation of Schuyler's lost letters becomes even more ambiguous if one considers the power dynamics that are at play in the scene: Eliza's decision is portrayed as a willful and voluntary act of claiming a part of herself that was never meant to belong to history, but at the same time denies the fact of conscious eradication at the hands of oppressive powers. Her act of burning the letters has been interpreted as an act of (em)power(ment), but it is crucial to note that Miranda selects an act of destructive silencing to express Eliza's attitude toward her legacy, instead of the productivity showcased by her male companion Alexander Hamilton. Eliza's legacy must first be silenced, while Hamilton is allowed to broadcast his thoughts freely during his lifetime. It seems fair to acknowledge that the burning of letters "becomes a visual subversion of a presumed power dynamic and an assertion that" she can regain "power over the telling of history" (Madison 69). In Eliza's case, however, this silence is being imposed by herself, and not an external force, as would be more historically accurate.

The inclusion and exclusion of select characters and groups within history is the focal point of Miranda's musical. From the beginning, *Hamilton* dedicates itself to narrating a story of a lesser-known Founding Father, a fact effectively bemoaned by Angelica who states that "every other Founding Father's story gets told." Notably, this positions Alexander Hamilton as an underrepresented character in American national mythology, when in fact he belongs to the canonical and venerated records of the Founding's history.

The very last piece of the musical finally succeeds in combining both political (i.e., public) and private achievements in the formation of Hamilton's legacy, wondering about "who remembers your name? Who keeps your flame?" ("Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story"). In it, the characters of Jefferson, Madison, Washington, and Burr celebrate Hamilton's political legacy, while Eliza speaks to the ideological heritage of his actions (Madison 69). This, however,

**“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?”: Founders Chic and Narrative Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton***

requires her to include herself “in the narrative” of the Founding as it is being told on stage (“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”). Her initial focus on Hamilton’s legacy is changed and rephrased to actively include her own story (“will they tell my story?”). Here, Eliza treads the fine line between passive and active history-making: She actively participates in the process of narration but is aware of her dependency on the whims of future historians and their contemporaries, which will ultimately dictate whose narratives will remain relevant.

With regard to this particular question of narrative participation, there is a singular performative feature at the end of the show that has largely remained unacknowledged due to the select and limited availability of the musical’s visual experience. The distribution of the musical in the format of a digital recording has allowed for a more scrutinizing look into the performances on stage. The very final moment of *Hamilton* continues the trend of fourth-wall breaks visible in the live performance, in which the actors frequently make eye contact with the audience while intoning their lyrics. Eliza’s own conversation with the audience begins in “Helpless” with her intimate and personal rendering of her romance with Hamilton. Similarly, the audience is also allowed to bear witness to her destruction of archival evidence, which establishes Eliza as a primary communicator of history for the contemporary audience and present. This intimacy between her character and the audience of today’s America culminates in the stage performance’s very final moment, which shows Eliza audibly gasping as the musical’s creator Lin-Manuel Miranda, still dressed as the character of Alexander Hamilton but now performing as himself, takes her hand to lead her to the front of the stage. Her gasp marks the sudden recognition that it is her story that is being told at that exact moment, on stage, in twenty-first-century America.

*Hamilton*’s culminating moment reveals its thesis: Legacy and history are as malleable as myth and can be told by anyone. More specifically, the musical approaches its historical source material in the spirit of its contemporary, liberal ideologies, thus introducing a new way of telling a history that affirms its adaptability and universality. This speaks to Monteiro’s remark that “whenever a historical story is shared, it has an ideological component” and thereby reveals the ideology of the one telling the story, not the figures involved in it (98). By breaking with the narrative paradigms of Founders Chic and opting for diverse and changing narrative authority, *Hamilton* allows the story to belong to everyone—the writer, artist, and, most importantly, the audience.

## CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING THE AMERICAN PAST?

Lin-Manuel Miranda's 2015 musical *Hamilton* has been both praised and criticized since its first performance and continues to inform social media discourse, popular culture, as well as conversations surrounding the problematic mythmaking of America's past. It has been equally lauded as an "immigrants' rights symbol" and criticized as "colonial propaganda," remaining subject to continuous scrutiny (Street; "What Is *Hamilton*" 00:01:33). Over the course of writing this paper, numerous new critical assessments and video essays on the musical emerged, proving its widespread resurgence into the American mainstream media dialogue after its distribution on digital streaming services (e.g., "Is *Hamilton* Bad?")

Early criticism, such as the work of Reed and Monteiro, largely focused on the racial discourse introduced by the show's casting as well as on the neglect of select historical facts. More recent criticism has concentrated on the use of narrative and affective characterization, both of which define the musical's widespread popularity and influence on contemporary social and cultural movements. Furthermore, the adaptability of the show's lyrics, sentiments, and ideologies have the potential to further progressive political development as well as the normalization of inclusive and diverse historiography. Edits made by fans have appeared in the midst of Black Lives Matter protests, which symbolically equate the musical's revolutionary language with contemporary social justice awareness and movements. In the same progressive vein of identity politics, the cast and crew encouraged registration and voting prior to the 2020 Election (from an overtly partisan position). In one recent interview, Miranda also directly linked the gun violence seen in *Hamilton* to the police brutality rampant in the American past and present—while failing to acknowledge the racial and systemic difference between the two (Knight 00:03:40). Despite these shortcomings, the applicability of the musical's rhetoric onto progressive social movements cannot be denied and, in the end, it determines the musical's longevity and cultural impact far more than the criticism expressed by academics.

Miranda's show effectively combines aspects of familiar American history with necessary revisions of American identity. *Hamilton* deliberately and consciously conforms to the formulaic glorification of the Founding Fathers, as established through Founders Chic, while exposing its malleability and status of romanticized myth in the very act of telling it. The race-conscious casting visually addresses the

**“Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?”: Founders Chic and Narrative  
Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton***

flexibility of appropriating the Founding Fathers’ story—a flexibility that is similarly present in the Chic phenomenon, not to mention most of historical fiction—while the cumulative rephrasing and narrative shift through Eliza heralds a rejection of the literary trend’s authority on history. It effectively widens the spectrum of both individual and collective (hi)storytelling, beginning with the musical’s lyrics, strengthened by the cast and creators’ active presence on social media, and continued throughout the audience and fans’ avid adaption and continuation of the media’s core intent and message.

In his fiction writing and, arguably, modern mythmaking, Miranda has rewritten the Founding’s *grand récit* in the context of contemporary rhetoric and media. The musical performs as such with acute awareness and meta-reference to its own position within that *récit* by placing characters such as George Washington and Elizabeth Schuyler at the crux of this awareness. It is the musical’s—and especially Eliza’s—continuous and overt dialogue with the audience and contemporary American identity that asserts that it is far more concerned with the present than with the past. *Hamilton* must merely speak through the past in order to express and contextualize the present. The fact that this rhetoric succeeds in affecting an international audience proves the necessity of historical mythmaking. Our present can only be fully understood and negated through the lens of myth and collective reimaging.

#### WORKS CITED

- Brands, H. W. “Founders Chic: Our Reverence for the Fathers Has Gotten out of Hand.” *The Atlantic*, Sep. 2003, [theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/09/founders-chic/302773/](http://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/09/founders-chic/302773/).
- Brown, Matthew. “A Founding, If You Can Keep It.” *The Independent Review*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2017, pp. 489-96.
- . “*Hamilton* on Broadway and the Founding in American Culture.” Introduction. *The Independent Review*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2017, pp. 485-87.
- “Chained and Shot: Rise Up – *Hamilton* Musical My Shot – Black Lives Matter.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lando Music, 9 July 2020, [youtu.be/KGIINYndo\\_Q](https://youtu.be/KGIINYndo_Q).
- Gentry, Philip. “*Hamilton*’s Ghosts.” *American Music*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2017, pp. 271-80.
- “*Hamilton* X When We All Vote.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Hamilton, 22 Sept. 2020, [youtu.be/YMmkXAIRXCU](https://youtu.be/YMmkXAIRXCU).

- Harbert, Elissa. "Hamilton and History Musicals." *American Music*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2018, pp. 412-28.
- Hogeland, William. "From Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* to *Hamilton: An American Musical*." *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past*, edited by Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter, Rutgers UP, 2018, pp. 17-41.
- "Is *Hamilton* Bad?" *You Tube*, uploaded by Wisecrack, 14 Sept. 2020, [youtu.be/v4tVrvwzswA](https://youtu.be/v4tVrvwzswA).
- Keyes, Elizabeth. "Broadway's *Hamilton* and the Willing Suspension of Reality-Based Moral Consciousness." *CounterPunch*, 21 Mar. 2019, [counterpunch.org/2019/03/21/broadways-hamilton-and-the-willing-suspension-of-reality-based-moral-consciousness/](https://counterpunch.org/2019/03/21/broadways-hamilton-and-the-willing-suspension-of-reality-based-moral-consciousness/).
- King, Karen L. *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. Polebridge, 2003.
- Knight, Keltie. "Lin-Manuel Miranda Talks *Hamilton* and Black Lives Matter (Exclusive)." *You Tube*, uploaded by Entertainment Tonight, 3 July 2020, [youtu.be/WsG9zEFeomg](https://youtu.be/WsG9zEFeomg).
- Kustritz, Anne. "Revolutionary America from Concord and Lexington to Ferguson: Folk Transmediation of Historical Storytelling." *Narrative Culture*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 140-60.
- Lewis, Helen. "Straight Outta Congress: How Lin-Manuel Miranda Rewrote American History." *New Statesman*, 1 Dec. 2017, pp. 44-48.
- Madison, Katherine S. "'Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story': The Use and Representation of Records in *Hamilton: An American Musical*." *The American Archivist*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2017, pp. 53-81.
- Martinez, Claudya. "Lin-Manuel Miranda Reacts To Protesters Using His Lyrics On Signs." *mitú*, 6 Feb. 2017, [wearemitu.com/things-that-matter/lin-manuel-reacts-to-protestersusing-his-lyrics-on-signs/](https://wearemitu.com/things-that-matter/lin-manuel-reacts-to-protestersusing-his-lyrics-on-signs/).
- Miranda, Lin-Manuel, creator. *Hamilton*. Disney+, 2020.
- Monteiro, Lyra D. "Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*." *The Public Historian*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2016, pp. 89-98.
- Nathans, Heather S. "Crooked Histories: Re-Presenting Race, Slavery, and Alexander Hamilton Onstage." *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2017, pp. 271-78.
- Onion, Rebecca. "A *Hamilton* Skeptic on Why the Show Isn't As Revolutionary As It Seems." *Slate*, 5 Apr. 2016, [slate.com/culture/2016/04/a-hamilton-critic-on-why-themusical-isnt-so-revolutionary.html](https://slate.com/culture/2016/04/a-hamilton-critic-on-why-themusical-isnt-so-revolutionary.html).

**"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?": Founders Chic and Narrative  
Awareness in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton***

- "Original *Hamilton* Cast Reunion | Be in the Room Where It Happens and VOTE | Biden Harris 2020." *YouTube*, uploaded by Joe Biden, 17 Oct. 2020, [youtu.be/YSuU2WEgiss](https://youtu.be/YSuU2WEgiss).
- Owen, Ken. "Historians and *Hamilton*: Founders Chic and the Cult of Personality." *The Junto*, 21 Apr. 2016, [earlyamericanists.com/2016/04/21/historians-and-hamilton-founderschic-and-the-cult-of-personality/](https://earlyamericanists.com/2016/04/21/historians-and-hamilton-founderschic-and-the-cult-of-personality/).
- Owens, Deirdre Cooper. *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*. U of Georgia P, 2017.
- Reed, Ishmael. "'Hamilton: the Musical:' Black Actors Dress Up like Slave Traders...and It's Not Halloween." *CounterPunch*, 21 Aug. 2015, [counterpunch.org/2015/08/21/Hamilton-the-musical-black-actors-dress-up-like-slave-tradersand-its-not-halloween/](https://counterpunch.org/2015/08/21/Hamilton-the-musical-black-actors-dress-up-like-slave-tradersand-its-not-halloween/).
- "Resurged and Redeveloped: Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* and the Refocusing of American Identity." *YouTube*, uploaded by Zayne Allen, 17 Nov. 2016, [youtu.be/GuMrqF-uW6Q](https://youtu.be/GuMrqF-uW6Q).
- Rose, Charlie. "Lin-Manuel Miranda and Thomas Kail on *Hamilton* and *Burr*." *YouTube*, uploaded by Charlie Rose, 21 Apr. 2015, [youtu.be/TarYyihspdc](https://youtu.be/TarYyihspdc).
- Street, Paul. "Miranda, Obama, and *Hamilton*: an Orwellian M n ge   Trois for the Neoliberal Age." *CounterPunch*, 24 June 2016, [counterpunch.org/2016/06/24/miranda-obama-and-Hamilton-an-orwellian-menage-a-trois-for-the-neoliberal-age/](https://counterpunch.org/2016/06/24/miranda-obama-and-Hamilton-an-orwellian-menage-a-trois-for-the-neoliberal-age/).
- Waldstreicher, David. "Founders Chic As Culture War." Review of *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* by Joseph J. Ellis, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* by Joanne B. Freeman, and *John Adams* by David McCullough. *Radical History Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2002, pp. 185-94.
- "What Is *Hamilton* (the Musical) Trying to Say?" *YouTube*, uploaded by NerdSync, 8 July 2020, [youtu.be/doJNckxshCg](https://youtu.be/doJNckxshCg).
- "The Wishful Idealism of *Hamilton*." *YouTube*, uploaded by Quinton Reviews, 6 July 2020, [youtu.be/vLQX3eelh2o](https://youtu.be/vLQX3eelh2o).