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“Who Tells Your Story?”: *Hamilton: An American Musical* as Intra-Cultural Adaptation

### Abstract

Lin-Manuel Miranda’s closing number and final line to *Hamilton: An American Musical* is not a resounding proclamation nor a comforting message of hope. A stoic, sobering tripartite question, delivered by the company, concludes each performance: “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?” Alexander Hamilton the character, for all his extraordinary eloquence and innovative genius, does not get the last word.

As a work of musical theater, *Hamilton* has been hailed as a revolution. Major reasons for this include its style and subject matter. It accomplishes much more than a dramatization of the life and death of one of America’s less-known founding fathers; it is a modern adaptation of America’s founding, integrating the cross-temporal and complex cultures of America through elevated language and performative art. Naturally, “adaptation” entails modification for the purpose of fitting new circumstances. In the case of *Hamilton*, Miranda adapts the life of Alexander Hamilton from Ron Chernow’s 2004 eponymous biography *Alexander Hamilton*, a rare kind of transition in terms of genre. Breaching the differences between static page and live stage, Miranda marshals hip-hop and rap, pop, R&B, Broadway show tunes, and other conventions of theater, adapting colonial America for and through our contemporary American art forms. *Hamilton*, asserts show-director Tommy Kail, “is a story about America then, told by America now” (qtd. in *Hamilton: The Revolution* 33). As such, *Hamilton* highlights not just the cultural significance but also the potentials imbued in the act of retelling history. “That’s this whole show,” affirms Miranda. “Ron [Chernow] tells you a

story and he's the star of the story. I tell you a story and I'm the star of the story. History is entirely created by the person who tells the story" (33).

Working from Chernow's biography (2004), the Original Broadway Cast Recording of *Hamilton* (2015), *Hamilton: The Revolution* by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter (of the Public Theater, where *Hamilton* debuted off-Broadway), which includes Miranda's full libretti and annotations (2016), and the PBS documentary of the musical *Hamilton's America* (2016), this essay will approach *Hamilton: An American Musical* as a unique case of "intra-American cultural adaptation." An essay by Michael Steppat, "The Protean Qualities of Americanism: An Exploration," will provide critical footing. In part, this essay will examine the potential risks behind two of the show's celebrated hallmarks—its (almost) color-blind casting and its portrayal of Alexander Hamilton as successful immigrant.

*Hamilton* not only ends with a question, it opens with one. Hamilton not only forfeits the last lines of this retelling, his killer takes the first. Ten notes in, Aaron Burr asks, "How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a / Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten / Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, / Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?" Shortly after, the company sings, "Alexander Hamilton / We are waiting in the wings for you," whereafter Hamilton descends back onto the stage floor (*Hamilton: The Revolution* 16-17). The opening number, clearly, calls direct attention to the act of adapting/retelling history. *Hamilton: An American Musical*, this essay will argue, adapts the story of its eponymous founding father to reaffirm and reinterpret what it means to be (an) American, offering a compelling, inspired, but occasionally idealized retelling of America's founding and its first Treasury Secretary.

## Works Cited

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