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Who Tells Our Story: Intersectional Temporalities in Hamilton, An American Musical

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Abstract:

This article examines the ways in which *Hamilton: An American Musical* can be read less as a historical account and more as a prediction of a future immigrant, who is called upon to (re)define US nationhood. Keeping with the tempo of the musical as well as the broader issues of time, space, and identity it attempts to address, this article is presented as a dialogical rap. The co-authors' discussion frames *Hamilton* as an example of the power of unplottable, time-arresting immigrant bodies, to whom the colonial imposition of linear history does not apply. From this framework, the authors' conversation shifts to critiques of racialized tropes running through the production as well as the inaccessibility of theatre tickets. The goal of this dialogical analysis is to invite further debate about the kinds of immigrant time/space travel that make visible questions of agency, representation, and access.

Keywords: Hamilton, immigrant, temporality, race

**Who Tells Our Story:
Intersectional Temporalities in *Hamilton*, An American Musical**

Lin-Manuel Miranda's (re)imagined hip-hop tale opens from the perspective of its self-proclaimed villain, Aaron Burr (2015). On the surface, the opening number serves as a narrative framing the confluence of events that led to Alexander Hamilton's arrival in the United States. Yet, as the first few lines indicate, the song also introduces a crucial question about access and privilege: how does someone without birth, wealth, or colonial heritage get to become a national, historical figure?

This question, which recurs throughout the musical and in many ways betrays Burr's own fixation, is at the heart of our analysis; in fact, it provided the impetus for this co-written article. As can be expected from two self-identified scholar/teacher/writers, we spent days processing everything we could about our audience experience with *Hamilton*. In one particularly lively text message exchange, several questions about temporality emerged. On a micro level, this first sentence of the show, structured in performance as a run-on and a question, covers several chapters of Ron Chernow's book, *Alexander Hamilton* (2005), which served as inspiration for the musical. Chernow's biography centers on Hamilton's rise from tragic circumstances in St. Croix to prosperity in the United States of America, where he would eventually become the country's first Secretary of Treasury. The musical adapts this narrative by focusing, in part, on the rivalry between Hamilton and a fellow lawyer and revolutionary soldier, Aaron Burr. While Burr's opening question introduces him as the narrator and antagonist, it also sets the pace for the show. As Miranda himself explained in an interview with Charlie Rose, this introductory question is answered in the two hours and forty-five minutes of the musical that follow. Miranda says, "the thing about Hamilton is that he spoke in paragraphs," and, thus, the opening line, its

callback to “Hamiltonian paragraphs,” and the narrative ground it covers, are meta-temporally significant.¹ This line simultaneously stretches, condenses, and appropriates temporal conventions by fast-rapping and fast-forwarding through plot points in Hamilton’s life story and running over its own grammatical structures with remarkable self-awareness.

On a macro level, we believe that *Hamilton* is less a glance back at a historical figure and more a future projection of an immigrant “messiah” of sorts, a person of Othered origins who (re)defines US nationhood in significant ways (for better or for worse). Or, perhaps, this musical is neither historical nor futuristic but exists in an unknowable, unplottable moment. In either case, it is worth analysing how Hamilton, the historical figure, is perceived and constructed as a “founding father,” a “colonialist,” an “expat,” and/or “immigrant”—labels that reference how bodies shift temporally and spatially (from one land to the next). It is also noteworthy that these labels are differently and strategically applied to both racialised and de-racialised bodies: As one of our students questioned, who gets to be an “ex-pat” and who gets labelled an “immigrant” and why does this inconsistency exist?

Keeping with the unwieldy nature of the musical as well as the broader and specific issues of time, space, and identity it attempts to address, this article is itself a dialogical rap. We explore some of the theoretical considerations that frame our reading of *Hamilton* (and through it, our own bodies and embodied experiences). From this mutual framework, our conversation shifts to the various ways in which queer and racial temporalities manifest themselves through staging, music, and reimagined narratives. Our reading of *Hamilton* projects into the future and intentionally overlooks debates over whether Miranda’s musical is an accurate/sanitised version of history. Instead, we hope that our dialogue can open up spaces for more debates about the kinds of immigrant time/space travel that make visible our own agency, told in our own voice. George Washington (originally played by Chris Jackson) reminds Hamilton throughout the play that history is always told in hindsight, from the perspective of historians and interpreters rather than those who lived that very reality. Here, we seek to take control: To riff off and strategically appropriate a line in the musical, *we live, we die, we tell OUR story.*²

In fact, as Shereen’s opening lines acknowledge, we recognise a certain level of dissonance inherent to addressing concerns of Black and Brown racialised bodies as two cisgender women who themselves are not Black. Our article speaks from our personal experiences as non-white immigrants and our views of how these identities are mirrored in the musical. Rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of the ways race and ethnicity are (re)presented within *Hamilton*, our goal is to open and facilitate further discussion.

Shereen:

How do two immigrants, one Indo-Canadian, the other Brazilian-Latina, both cisgender women who work at a public college in Jamaica, Queens, acquire tickets to see *Hamilton* on Broadway?

Is it the confluence of months of research, playing the digital lottery in spite of its daily disappointment, and begrudged acquiescence to the horror of capitalism?

Andie:

Sadly, yes. As any good scholar might do, we researched. We stalked prices on ticket resale apps as they dropped right before show time on a Wednesday afternoon. It was getting to be truly agonising.

Shereen:

We had been agonising for months, actually, like everybody else. And desperately Hamil-stalking (just like everybody else). Time was of essence. Time is everything.

Andie:

Timing. Time. And a bit of luck! I still can't believe we actually saw it. But more importantly, I can't believe how much seeing the musical changed my entire understanding of the story Miranda was trying to tell.

Shereen:

Seeing Hamilton has me thinking a lot about queer, racialised temporalities, and it's breathing new life into some ideas I've had floating around about the specificities of transatlantic passage—coerced, captive, and consensual passage, that is.

For one thing, I'm thinking about what my own immigrant family and community often refer to as BST, "Brown Standard Time," the stereotype that Brown people are "always late." There's an inherent insult in that, of course, *and* there's a way in which I think we can repurpose the idea of "always late" toward something queerly powerful like the impossibility of holding Brown bodies to the tyranny of Western, linear time!

If I get more specific here with idea of Alexander Hamilton and my own family consenting (and I know consent is also a multi-valenced term) to a transatlantic migration in search of opportunities, there is something profoundly interesting taking place. How, for instance, do immigrant bodies experience, account for, and shape the passage itself as well as the passage, more abstractly, of time. On one hand, if we use a western map of left (west) to right (east) for these considerations, then transatlantic migration is about traversing oceans east to west, "backwards," and we often arrive a day "later" yet on the same day we departed because of time zones and air travel. In this regard, the immigrant body is a time-traveling one, and the date of departure may also be the date of arrival, thus making the immigrant simultaneously one day late, one day early, and on time. Of note, Hamilton's passage from St. Croix to the US is markedly different from that of anyone voyaging from "far" or further east to North America, and I will return this point for a deeper analysis later on.

Maybe for some immigrant bodies, time cannot exist linearly. Maybe it's elusive or artificial, and because of this, Black and Brown bodies more generally, the immigrants, the indigenous, those who are coerced, and those who are refugees, should actually get to speak first and last when we speak at all. If we arrive and are, thus, eternally one day "behind" AND one day "ahead" at the same time, our bodies and very existence must be maddening to a linearly-bound coloniser who, in turn, treats us with contempt and suspicion and characterises us as "behind" the curve or needing to catch up. Yet perhaps the real "concern" is that we are, temporally speaking, neither ahead nor behind *and* both at once. Any given moment, though fleeting, is neither our present nor current one but experienced as both a present and current moment. It occupies its own queered time zone that cannot be plotted, contained, or marked by coloniser metrics and units.

Andie:

Time-travel as resistance—there is something quite poetic and yet concrete about that idea. It suggests that presentism is not a fallacy but in fact a mode of agency. Rather than accept the tension inherent to placing our actions in either the past or present, your theory suggests that the immigrant body can only *be*. This is particularly important for our understanding of home and nation (as well as our home-nation). I'm thinking specifically about my friends and family claiming that I've been "Americanised" and somehow unwittingly lost a crucial element of Brazilian identity. And yet, when I first meet most Americans the question of my ethnicity is always up for debate: they can tell I am foreign, but cannot easily label me by my accent or physical appearance. If we are to escape this problematic circular negation (at the risk of being Othered at both ends of our nationhood), time travel—or is this more of a quantum stagnation?—is an empowering solution.

As Chernow (2005) admits, the historical Alexander Hamilton himself was always perceived as an outsider. Despite what paintings and illustrations suggest to us now, Hamilton's fellow founding fathers (an increasingly privileged, alienating term!) never let him forget he wasn't white. John Adams in particular qualified his heritage and status as "great disadvantages" since as a foreigner he "could scarcely acquire the opinions, feelings, or principles of the American people."³ In the musical, Hamilton's unplotable agency is made literal by the concentric turntables in the center of the stage. His body, along with the bodies of his allies and enemies, are in constant motion through, past, and beyond time, whether that is by dodging a bullet, rethinking choices, or fighting wars.

It is no coincidence, then, that Hamilton's peers define his work ethic as "non-stop": it was only by resisting the linear and colonial narrative that he managed to have corrected the injustices he had seen around him in hopes for a new, more inclusive nation. I don't think we should overlook the fact that Hamilton's perspective in the song "Non-Stop," which closes act one, is told mostly

in the past, whereas the act of nation building is fully in the present. Hamilton talks about how his friends had studied, fought, and died, using the first-person plural, “we.” Are we, the audience, part of that group? Does Hamilton appear to be running out of time simply because he works within the structure of BST, in which time both moves and stands still, is constantly rebuilt and renegotiated? What broader implications does this have beyond the musical?

Shereen:

Your question and earlier reference to “dodging a bullet” can be applied directly to the final duel scene in which Burr shoots Hamilton. The bullet is paused and held between the fingers of one of the ensemble cast members, and time is essentially frozen while Hamilton reflects upon his life lived and impending death. Time is stopped for Hamilton, or, perhaps, we can argue that Hamilton has the privilege of stopping time.

So, to return to my early concern and your question about the broader implications, we might start by considering the extent to which it is fair to count Alexander Hamilton’s voyage a “transatlantic” migration. Is it irony or intrigue that St. Croix lies within the Atlantic Time Zone, not half or one “day away” from New York City? Although I want to avoid conflating Hamilton’s immigrant experience with those of ALL Black and Brown voyagers, I want to examine the overlays.

According, again, to an American world map, the movement from St. Croix to New York is upward, and not insignificantly, Hamilton is known to have “risen” through the ranks and benefited from an “upwardly” mobile life. In many ways, Hamilton co-writes and achieves the ubiquitous and ever-problematized “American Dream.” His is, arguably, a status quo story, a bootstraps master narrative in which the hardworking immigrant succeeds and soars by raced, classed, gendered definitions of success and soaring.

When I think closely about Hamilton’s life in the context of upward mobility, I can see how he at once twists and upholds a “normativized” immigrant temporality where rising through the ranks and growing in one’s potential appears to be possible and is encouraged if not demanded. In contrast, the transatlantic, racialized temporalities often affecting immigrant/Black/Brown bodies can be read as queer in that there is an assumed Freudian “arrested development” projected onto us; colonisers/welcomers are systemically encouraged to hold paternalistic views of who we are, infantilising the “newcomer” as a newborn in need of guidance and instruction for how to behave, assimilate, even “naturalise.”

This arrested development aligns with Halberstam’s (2005) explanation of “queer time” and “queer space”: “If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity” (1). The Black/Brown newcomer is often perceived as stunted (in growth) and

regressive (in age), but perhaps there's a way to flip this script, to twist and queer the insult and victimising sting of it, and instead, view our so-called "newborn" status as a self-determined rebirth. Perhaps instead of being arrested, we are the ones *ARRESTING* time; we are the agents and arbiters of our immigrant temporality. And perhaps this could be a useful lens through which to read iterations of immigrants across various texts beyond the scope of this musical.

Andie:

Speaking of arresting time, I was similarly intrigued by that climax in "The World Was Wide Enough," where time stops just before Hamilton is about to be fatally shot. In that moment, our protagonist gets to confront death—a meeting he's envisioned since the start of our narrative.

While Burr dwells on his past, Hamilton relives his future, imagining death to the point that it feels like a recollection, rather than a fear for what's to come. But Hamilton's perspective on the inevitability of his life propels him forward: every day gained is a victory, every other moment is a slice of the "movement," building toward a greater victory, building toward his legacy. While Burr's own self-obsessed narrative places him outside the story, Hamilton sees himself within a world order that has deliberately called out to him ("The World Was Wide Enough"). In that crucial final moment, Hamilton surrenders his legacy to the next generation while Burr just surrenders: even at the end, he continues to fixate on the role of history holding him accountable for every mistake ("The World Was Wide Enough"). And so, Burr becomes the inevitable villain in this story: someone who must be willing to "wait for it," while Hamilton forges ahead writing the constitution, reimagining the financial system, and drawing supporters who will build on his legacy ("Non-Stop").

This speaks to me as a mirror to different perspectives on race relations, where Miranda seems to build an America/stage where immigrants and people of color work through and perform their own isolation and advocacy based upon conflicting visions of the future. In both cases, agency and positionality are key elements.

Shereen:

On a very barebones material level, Hamilton is remembered for having created the federal banking system. Today, there are many who perceive the U.S. Economy as a wreck in need of substantive creative solutions. A question worth asking might be: who bears the burden of finding these solutions? Who is called upon to be the (financial) fixer? And how about the Puerto Rico debt crisis? The same week we saw *Hamilton*, I also heard two separate pieces on the current situation in PR, on which both Miranda and his father have publicly commented. In so many ways this musical can function as a story of what is *going to* have to happen for some version of survival. But an economist could explain these intricacies much better than I ever could!

Andie:

I'm no economist, but it sounds like we need to reinvent the economic system much in the way we're reinventing Hamilton himself.

I would venture to say that some of this potential is reflected in the parallelism of the casting. For instance, in the opening number, Daveed Diggs and Okieriete Onaodowan introduce themselves as characters who had “fought” with Hamilton. As annotators on Genius have suggested, the sentence takes on a double meaning, since Diggs and Onaodowan play Hamilton’s close friends and adversaries in Acts I and II, respectively.⁴ As Hercules Mulligan and the Marquis de Lafayette, they play Hamilton’s fellow underprivileged fighters—Mulligan, a tailor’s apprentice invested in climbing the social ladder, and Lafayette, a Frenchman apprenticing in the art of popular revolution. In Act II, Diggs becomes Thomas Jefferson, the very picture of privilege from the moment of his arrival, descending down the stairs in a plush velvet suit. His right-hand man is Onaodowan’s James Madison, physically and metaphorically diminished to represent the sickly leader of the House of Representatives. Beyond the poetic symbolism within the musical itself, I would argue that the duality here also echoes the ways in which people of color are often placed in situations where we compete with or undermine one another rather than uniting in solidarity, which originated as a divide-and-conquer “master” strategy.

Broadly speaking, however, the parallel also allows Diggs and Onaodowan to gain more visibility on stage and to represent both those who fought for the new nation and those who helped shape its political structure. It likely comes as no surprise to us that both actors have discussed the crucial value of these roles given the lack of representation and opportunities for Black and Brown characters to perform central roles on Broadway.

Of course, I could have easily ended that sentence before the qualifier: the lack of opportunities and access is widespread, and Broadway is just a symptom of a much larger national problem. To circle back to your point about Puerto Rico and giving this country some kind of financial remedy (see “Cabinet Battle #1”): part of the challenge is in actualising the reality of the musical—not just its diversity, but the complex ways in which it challenges history and storytelling by placing Black and Brown bodies (and voices) as authors, fighters, and heads of state. But in what ways do we, the audience, bear a responsibility to realise this project?

Shereen:

I'm so glad you're bringing this up: Black and Brown actors performing the roles of the white so-called “founding fathers,” slave-owners, and citizens. A lot of useful critiques and questions have been raised about the aesthetics and deeper significance of this cast. The very choice to cast mostly Black and Brown characters in these roles seems to breathe new life into Broadway and American history, but also erase lived realities. But let's return to this point later.

To answer your question: perhaps we need to breathe new creative life into our understandings of commerce, perhaps by dismantling the “territorial and capitalist logics [or illogics!] of power” (to borrow loosely from David Harvey), and in order to keep living, as Eliza, on more than one occasion, begs of her husband and son (Harvey 2005, 99 ff). It's like we need a second coming of a Hamilton figure or a “messiah of sorts” as I mentioned earlier, but I'd argue this needs to be someone who can/will antagonise and queer the structures that were built before. It's a call for an "act two" of the U.S. where the characters/leaders reposition themselves in a fight for social justice, as you said, not unlike act two of the musical where Daveed Diggs who played the Marquis de Lafayette transitions into Thomas Jefferson, a character with a revised swagger, presence, and rhetorical delivery.

I also want to remain vigilant of how the idea of a “fixer” or “messiah in the form of an immigrant body may be at once intriguing *and* vexed by racist narrative conventions where Black and Brown people are called upon to “mop up the master’s mess.”

Andie:

Yes, and this is especially tricky when we bring gender into our discussion of queer, racialised temporality. In some ways, I think the show is self-aware of these opportunities and the risks that come up when we look at history as fluid and non-linear. Because to perform and interpret history is, inevitably, to find near-miss moments where any wrong choice or failure could have changed the making of the country forever. What's more, when these choices involve placing the immigrant body in moments of servitude, sacrifice, and self-denial, we have to be especially aware of resisting narrative conventions.

I'm thinking here of “Satisfied,” where Angelica Schuyler revisits the events that led to her sister Eliza's marriage to Hamilton. With aid from the two concentric turntables on the stage floor, the scene literally rewinds back to the moments the audience observed in the previous song, “A Winter's Ball.” Angelica wonders aloud what might have happened had she taken the time to get to know Hamilton, instead of making the logical decision to give him up to the equally-in-love Eliza. In addition to the drama a potential love triangle provides, this song and its choreography set an important tone for the larger argument of the musical: we cannot move forward and learn from our history without perspective and hindsight.

Satisfied is equal parts regret and pragmatism: Angelica's choice will live with her in a way only she can truly comprehend; this does not mean, however, that it will haunt her. Seeing her sister's affection for Hamilton, she realises three important things: 1) she has a responsibility to make a good match so as to increase her family's cultural capital; 2) similarly, Hamilton needs the Schuylers to earn capital and the respect he cannot earn himself as an immigrant; 3) Eliza deserves to be happy. This kind of self-sacrifice and emotional labour is one that will be familiar to many women, especially women of color, in the audience. It effectively highlights the work of

women in the revolution and helps humanise Hamilton's ambition as a love for justice, progress, and compassion.

Shereen:

This point about Angelica's "sacrifice" and prioritization of Eliza's happiness just made me think of festering tropes of the self-sacrificing Black woman that run so ubiquitously through cultural narratives. This trope seems especially pertinent to the original-cast performance we watched, where Angelica is played by a darker-skinned actor (who is Black) and Eliza, her sister, is played by a lighter-skinned person of color. With so much public buzz around how "progressive" or "future-forward" the almost entirely Black and Brown cast is said to be, I think it's important to reflect back on this persistently troubling trope, although I anticipate possible resistance to this kind of critique.

I wonder if/how the story and relationship that exists between the Angelica and Eliza we saw perform could easily be a contemporary retelling of a racist/shadeist historical narrative. Or is this indicative of the ways in which the past is our present, that racism/shadeism is just as much a contemporary problem unbound by strictures of time—namely past, present, future. This trope reflects and informs a racialised temporality: Dress Angelica up any way you/we would like, give her a leading heroic narrative voice, in *some* ways she is still occupying a very troubling and familiar position. On some level, she could be read as an embodiment of "mammy" archetypes, and so what's going on in the narrative is an attempt at audience seduction. This is a major criticism, I realise, and don't get me wrong: I think Angelica is a magnificent figure at the center of this musical. But I am compelled to ask if we are being manipulated to think of her as "advancing" a racial, gendered positionality. Be it her incredible fast-rapping solo that sets her on stage with men who have dominated fast-rap in the industry, more broadly, but also on the local level of this production, or her understandably feminist agenda—to prioritise another woman's happiness and by doing so subverting the misogyny inherent in stories where two women compete for love and particularly a man's love. The character, Angelica, is simultaneously a future feminist and a past prototype.

Andie:

Exactly. I keep thinking about the refreshing subversion of female competition counterpointed with the problematic ways in which both Angelica and Eliza exist, on a plot level, to support and highlight Hamilton's actions. This is further complicated by the fact that, historically, not much has survived in Eliza's own hand, but I'm reticent to suggest that Miranda is the one who then has to "rescue" the character by granting her the agency to remove herself from the story (see "Burn").

Nonetheless, agency here is important both thematically and literally, as the racial and gendered binds we're pointing out predicate a critical audience. More than most musicals, I think,

Hamilton relies on a certain degree of identification: first, from Miranda, who had to read Chernow's biography and sees in the protagonist not an elitist, capitalist "founding father," but a struggling immigrant who fought for the right to express his own ideals and build a futuristic nation that would have (always already) "sent for him." More importantly, though, the musical hinges on people who, like us, project themselves onto the struggles of the characters to find a voice and reclaim their space as people who get to (re)write history.

Of course, when it came down to it, we were a minority in an audience that was much more likely to think like Burr rather than Hamilton. As we well know, that early question of "how" was one the audience members in front of us were asking themselves: How do two classless, ignorant immigrants get dropped in the middle of the mezzanine, sitting right behind them? From the moment the lights went off and we cheered along with the crowd, they were intent on reminding us that this was not our place. "Are you going to do that [scream] the entire time? Because I might hit you," threatened the older patron in front of me. "You're being very rude, young lady," patronised the patron in front of you.

Shereen:

On one hand, I'm tempted to take the narrative of this horrible audience interaction and assault and perform an Angelica-style "rewind" of what happened. My impulse to do so comes from not wanting to be victimised by the narrative itself but rather to control how we play and replay it. And doing this feels at once ambitious and difficult because the incident was rooted in racist, ageist, classist ideologies that reveal, in the overarching narrative, how we (two Brown women) are also chewed up by capitalism. So, perhaps this is a matter of holding space for a deep critique of what happened while steering our narrative and "truth," so here goes:

For one thing, I feel a profound sadness that we can't share the joy and afterglow of seeing this performance with the people who deserve to be in the audience. I would even go so far as to say its inaccessibility is creating a sense of despair, which is definitely what we've been witnessing in conversations with our students who feel desperate to see the show. Our students who want to be in that theatre *should* be there, filling the seats with Black and Brown, working class/poor, curious, enthusiastic audience members. This seems like such an important and historic moment in live theatre, yet the fact that you and I were two of very few Brown faces present reveals a present-day iteration of a historically exclusionary reality.

I've been talking to one of my students, in particular, about how the acquisition of *Hamilton* tickets directly reflects the many insults of capitalism against Black, Brown, poor bodies.

Andie:

I think you're touching on one of the central critiques that has come out against the musical, namely that this impossible-to-see Broadway (the Great White Way for more reasons than one)

musical has become the epitome of gentrification. First, because it takes hip-hop, a genre that historically has been the mode of expression of Black, Brown, underprivileged voices, and repackages it to a largely white audience in an arguably “sanitised” way. Secondly, because its choice of venue automatically excludes its very subjects (and, in a way, its own cast) from taking part in what Miranda and McCarter have termed “the revolution.” While I don’t find that this is necessarily a critique on the musical as an art form—as we’ve discussed throughout this article, Miranda’s work makes important contributions worth attending to—our own experience unequivocally proves that Broadway in general and over-hyped musicals in particular remain a space of white privilege.

And yet, Miranda is not blind to this, nor is he comfortable allowing this power imbalance to continue restricting access to his intended audience. One systemic problem is that ticket bots scalp available tickets in large quantities, which third-party brokers then resell at absurd markups. As Miranda explains, “tickets are taken out of circulation, punishing people who can’t afford to pay more than face value” (see “Stop the Bots from Killing Broadway.” http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/07/opinion/stop-the-bots-from-killing-broadway.html?_r=0). Of course, even if legislation changes to address this, the reality is that our students, and the many others like them who deserve to see this show and think about the time-shifting ways in which it can affect their future, still can’t afford the ticket at its outrageous face value...

Shereen:

I think his article makes some useful points. And if we look internally at the musical to specific moments and lyrics, there are some deep links to what he’s critiquing in the *New York Times*. For example, I feel like “Wait For It” is such a poignant song that can definitely speak to theories and myths of economic trickle down, which on a broader scale encapsulates the total absence of “trickle down” when it comes to ticket accessibility. When I imagine this song in the context of all the people (our students and everyone else) who are standing in line for a chance at acquiring tickets day after day, I feel haunted by the chorus echoing Burr: “Wait for it”

Andie:

Except waiting for it eats at Burr from the inside: by the time we reach the end of the musical, he is actively blaming Hamilton for his frustrations and failings as a politician and as a person.

Shereen:

Yes! And so there is NO real trickle down. It’s a fallacy, a myth, and just as ephemeral as The American Dream.

Andie:

And of course historically we know Aaron Burr embodied a lot of these issues of privilege, class, and capitalism. He was more likely to be one of the racist audience members than someone

standing in the cancellation line outside. And Hamilton himself had a reputation as an elitist, ruthless capitalist. So when the young Hamilton asks “Aaron Burr, Sir” how he managed to graduate in two years in one of the most prestigious colleges in the country, the real answer is privilege: Burr’s father was the president of the college.

Shereen:

I can see how this may conflict with *and* support our theories especially if in historical accounts they were both “well off” financially. Perhaps what we can do is envision a kind of elasticity in the song “Wait For It”; we are stretching these lyrics to apply to those who are not “well off” like the people who can’t under any circumstances afford to “give in to capitalism” as we finally did by purchasing ridiculously priced tickets... Because we have the privilege to do so.

Andie:

And to push that parallel further, that’s the key ideological difference between taking advantage of the “shot” you see ahead of you and being willing to “wait for it”: The former implies opportunity, ambition, and initiative, while the latter suggests a place of frozen discomfort that only allows for stagnation. And if that’s the case, Burr becomes a victim of his own recurring tragedy. Waiting leads to frustration, disappointment, and eventually to violence, as Burr kills Hamilton in the final duel. Burr repeatedly claims to be someone who is always willing to “smile” rather than show his cards, but facing his loss in the presidential elections leads him to the immediate conclusion that Hamilton deliberately supported Thomas Jefferson just to prevent Burr from succeeding (see “Aaron Burr, Sir”; “Your Humble Servant”). Burr is unable to recognise the ways the system (and not Hamilton) works against him. The inevitable circularity of theater productions condemns this story to repeat itself, and condemns Burr to a liminal position just outside history (as our narrator, but also as a fictional character quite unlike his historical namesake), unable to halt the events that lead to his and Hamilton’s demise.

Shereen:

So, there’s probably also something very significant about the idea that Burr pulls the trigger on the bullet that leads to Hamilton’s demise, but then he is also trapped in the frozen moment of time where the bullet is held and Hamilton reflects on his life and death. And if Burr (as Miranda has also claimed) is haunted by having killed his “friend,” it might be useful to consider Miranda’s decision to end this show with Eliza’s story.

I’m compelled to look closely at the fact that Eliza lives to the age of 97, that’s 50 years after Hamilton’s death.⁵ In an interview with Phillipa Soo where she discusses her performance of Eliza, I was particularly struck by her take on that final gasp that ends the show.⁶ She comments that her gasp may have multiple interpretations and can change from performance to performance; it might be a gasp of relief, sadness, regret, joy, anticipation or the like. This remark made me think back to our strong and somewhat adverse reaction to the gasp. Can you

remind me what it was that we found repelling? Do you recall what we said about it? I think for me, Eliza's gasp seemed overly dramatised in a way that felt heavy-handed or too punctuated.⁷

Andie:

I think it was an uncomfortable moment because it came at the expense of our own catharsis—the last lines of the musical, which bring back several characters and highlight Hamilton's historical contribution, really heighten the emotional weight of his death. This is probably especially true for those of us who deeply identify with the character's struggle to succeed, particularly those crucial moments between paralysis and action. Then, suddenly, we are confronted with Eliza's reaction, and that moment maybe robbed us of taking ownership of our own feelings about Hamilton's journey as a bastard, orphan, immigrant.

But to get back to your point about her interview. When asked to explain the gasp, Soo avoided pinpointing a specific motivation. Instead, she suggested that every performance brings about a new gasp—sometimes a gasp of exhaustion, sometimes of relief, grief, death, or even wonder (especially as she looks up at the audience and faces the grandeur of *Hamilton* as performance). There's something poetic about this idea: much like the quantum movement of the immigrant body, accounting for queer and racialised temporality can never mean the same thing twice. Being both in the present and in the future, arresting time must allow for reflection. Each time we rewind, we do so critically, with intent. We insist on (re)positioning our bodies and voices in new iterations, so that, next time, the nation we get to build is increasingly inclusive, discursive, recursive.

Notes

1. This discussion occurs at the 11:09 minute mark of the Charlie Rose interview with Lin-Manuel Miranda
2. For full context within the lyrics, see "History Has Its Eyes on You" in the *Hamilton* soundtrack.
3. Quoted in Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 522. Adams also infamously called Hamilton a "Creole bastard," an epithet now immortalised in "The Adams Administration."
4. As the annotators also remind us, the parallels extend to Madison's work with Hamilton on The Federalist Papers (<http://genius.com/7858252>).
5. Of course there is something to be said about Eliza's status outside of the queer, immigrant bodies we are discussing here. This is beyond the scope of our project but may be worth pursuing in another context.
6. This discussion occurs at the 22:13 minute mark of the AOL.com/BUILD interview from November 25, 2015.
7. The soundtrack for the musical ends with the full company singing to "Who Lives? Who Dies? Who Tells Your Story," but the live performance concludes with the spotlight on Eliza as she suddenly gasps for air. Some viewers interpret this moment as signaling Eliza's final breath.

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