

## Hamilton: An American Founding Father—or an Other?

Gabriela Lika Inga Moekoe<sup>1</sup>, Dwi Setiawan<sup>2</sup>

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,  
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA  
E-mail: [ielamoekoe@gmail.com](mailto:ielamoekoe@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [dewey@petra.ac.id](mailto:dewey@petra.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*Hamilton* is a highly successful musical, both critically and commercially, which has been applauded for its revolutionary inclusivity: the musical famously casts people of color, despite its characters being based on historical, living people who were not of color, including the towering figures of America's 'founding fathers'. A group of critics, however—minor yet nonetheless vital voices—have denounced this as superficial diversity that perpetuates the erasure of people of color from history; as no main character is based on a historical person of color. While certain writers and reviewers have offered rebuttals, there is yet to be critical exposition that the character Hamilton himself, rather than a representation of the founding father, is instead a representation of what postcolonialists term 'the other'; therefore making the work the opposite of an erasure of societally othered minority groups. As such, this paper examines, and later finds, that *Hamilton's* Hamilton is indeed the epitome—and thus a prime representation, signaling undeniable presence—of the other in the text.

**Keywords:** Musical Theater, American Literature, Postcolonialism, The Other, Immigrants.

### INTRODUCTION

To call Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015) a 'Broadway hit' would be an understatement. Since its debut in 2015, it has reached "near-universal critical acclaim" ("Patriotism on Broadway", 2015)—with stellar reviews (Brantley, 2015; among many others) and prestigious award wins (Broadway.com Staff, 2016) including the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama ("*Hamilton*, by Lin-Manuel Miranda", n.d.)—as well as unprecedented commercial success. From ticket prices that soar notoriously sky-high, to an adoring fanbase spanning teenagers from all over the globe—some of whom have not even been to the production (Milvy, 2016; Vine, 2017)—and A-list celebrities who have seen it multiple times (Grant, 2016; Boardman, 2017). The public has spoken, and it sings for *Hamilton*. Such unprecedented, viral response to a musical theater production, especially one about a Founding Father and the American revolution, justifies the common descriptor for *Hamilton*: "a cultural phenomenon" ("Remarks by the president", 2016).

A great part of *Hamilton's* success has been credited to its groundbreaking style of storytelling: it integrates musical theater with hip-hop, and the (white) figures of the Founding Fathers with artists of color (Piepenburg, 2016). As a sung-and-rapped-through musical, the work is permeated with non-stop hip-hop, alongside other styles and genres of music and dance (Miranda, 2016). Perhaps most controversially, the work also casts people of color as characters such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and of course, Alexander Hamilton. This has garnered much praise for the musical, with critics acknowledging it as a celebration of equality and multiculturalism (Fleishman, 2017; Mead, 2015).

Divergent criticism, from literary as well as other perspectives such as those historical, political, or financial, has nevertheless resurfaced (Reed, 2020; Romano et al., 2018; Owen, 2017; Magness, 2017; among others). In these responses, be they popular commentary or academic, most pertinently, the musical has been criticized as regressive and even elitist (Nichols, 2016) for its alleged exclusion or erasure of people of color (Monteiro, 2016).

**Moekoe, Setiawan:**

Hamilton: An American Founding Father—or an Other?

The paper deals directly with this claim by analyzing the text in search of the presence of the other, which is the role people of color are relegated to in America (i.e. the United States, not the continent). It investigates how *Hamilton* treats ‘the other’ by considering how the play might further *other* the American ‘other’ (see ‘Othering’) by presenting only historically white people as lead characters in a story of America’s birth. Conversely, it also explores the idea that Hamilton himself may be the most prominent evidence against such an interpretation; as this eponymous protagonist stands to be the embodiment of the other and their experiences.

This literary analysis of the American text through the context of the ‘self/other’ distinction in a postcolonial perspective, particularly one that is also international and Indonesian, sets the paper apart from other literature on the musical regarding its purported inclusivity. Part of the potentially unique and distinct insight the paper stands to offer is owed to the nature of Indonesia as a nation acutely aware of its colonial past, in a way America often is not (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002).

To that end, the analysis employs theories of postcolonialism, especially in regard of the other; and other relevant concepts on art and the genre.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Postcolonialism is the study of works arising from colonization (Hart & Goldie, 1993) with the goal of exploring the aftermath of colonialism in both culture and literature. The lack of a singular, totalitarian school of postcolonialism; making it a diverse collection of theories instead; is intended as “a positive move away from totalizing European traditions” (p. 155). A running theme in postcolonialism is the imperial idea of “Us-versus-Them”, explained by Edward Saïd (as cited in Gregory, 2004) as the false notion that any difference between the colonizers and the colonized is “epistemological and natural” (p. 24); when it is “constructed and situational”. This concept extends further to the naming of such a process: othering. The hegemonic group who appoints themselves as ‘the self’ thereby otherizes or others any other group, this latter being designated ‘the other’, through institutionalization and praxis that reinforces the existence of a fundamental distinction between the two. The terms became cemented into postcolonialism by the works of Frantz Fanon: ‘the self’, i.e. the hegemonic class, is the essential and the central; while the colonized are “always situated as other and unable to assume the necessary role as self” (Hart & Goldie, 1993, p. 155).

Beyond dynamics of blatant, systemized colonialism, the concept has been applied to other areas of study. Its true origins, after all, lie in the philosophical works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Since then, in other discourses, the idea of ‘the self’ may be applied to any specific group, who treats any other group as ‘the other’ by, overtly or otherwise, denying them true membership and equal standing with the former. In feminist discourse, Simone de Beauvoir employs the notion in *The Second Sex* (1949) to argue that women are the other in patriarchal society: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” Saïd (1987) similarly notes that imperialists “conceive of the difference between cultures, first, as creating a battlefield that separates them, and second, as inviting the West to control, contain, and otherwise govern [...] the Other.” (pp. 47-48). Michel Foucault also wrote in 1961’s *Folie et Dérailson: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* of “that other trick [...] through which men, in the gesture of sovereign reason that locks up their neighbour, communicate and recognise each other in the merciless language of non-madness; [...] the moment of that expulsion” (2013, p. xxvii). From postcolonialism to gender discourse to ableism; in the division of cultures, social classes, or individual thought and behavior; the idea of othering applies.

## ANALYSIS

This paper investigates how *Hamilton* truly treats groups that are systematically oppressed and relegated as “the other” to affirm that, contrary to the claims of certain critics, the other is truly present and prominent—although they are not present more explicitly and specifically as characters based on real-life people of color. If this is proven, one must reckon that the work, rather than being regressive or ultimately anti-inclusive, is thereby a proponent of diversity and equality; for it will have placed the other at center stage, and as the axis in the story of American revolution—therefore casting the other as the self. The thesis of the paper is that the titular character, that is, Hamilton himself, is the other epitomized.

### **Hamilton: An American Founding Father?**

While *Hamilton* has many principal characters outside of the mythicized Founding Fathers, not one of them is a person of color. To denouncers of the musical, this makes it guilty of black erasure (Monteiro, 2016) and perhaps erasure of all peoples and cultures aside from those of the Anglo-Saxon American: as if people of color and their contributions are written out of their own history. In this reading, the diversity of the cast is strictly superficial (Nichols, 2016); and results only in the perpetuation of the mythical magnanimity of a few white men (White, 2015) at the expense of real people of other colors and cultures that make America. Even in a story purportedly by and about them, the American other is othered.

This study argues against the premise of this argument, and in effect its thesis. The first crucial misreading, the study posits, occurs in mistaking the true focus of the story to be the historical people who have inspired the play’s characters. On the knowledge that *Hamilton* is a work of art, any reading, in order to be most relevant, must not forget that, as the musical’s name as well as its opening number gives away, the true focus of the work is *not* the Founding Fathers; it is not even Alexander Hamilton the Founding Father. It is simply and entirely Alexander Hamilton *the character*, that is to say, the artistic creation: the personage of the orphaned immigrant, and perhaps, as the subtitle continues, the personification of America, long dubbed “a nation of immigrants” (Kennedy, 1958).

Furthermore, in critical readings of literature and art, the realm of the factual serves not as a sacred foundation the way it does in empirical fields of study; but becomes merely one of many tools at the artist’s disposal to form meaning, and for audiences to formulate it. With this general understanding of the nature of art, even the most casual consumers of art, provided they are persons of rationality, should know to question the factual accuracy of any historical, biographical work; thereby removing dependency on historicity from works of art. This is not to say that the study suggests the artistic community begin recklessly espousing falsehoods to no end (as this would neither serve the search for meaning nor thusly art), but merely to highlight that critical readings of literature should always look beyond the practical and the ostentatious. Representation, after all, cannot be equated to replication. In his commentary on the complete libretto, Miranda (2016) writes: “Here’s the thing about Hamilton’s response: It’s more telling when he’s quiet than when he has something to say. This was true of the historical Hamilton as well” (p. 131). This is evidence that, as any other artist and creator of fiction, Miranda is aware of, and therefore responsible for, the distinction between *Hamilton*’s Hamilton, the character, and the *historical* Hamilton. While Hamilton *the character* may be inspired by and founded on Hamilton the founding father, one may never be mistaken for the other. As such, it should be understood that the Hamilton portrayed in *Hamilton*, as much as any aspect of the text, is but artistic interpretation. In this separation between the realm of the factual and the artistic, critical readings must therefore look into not only what works place on display, but also what meanings are constructed from said depictions within the relevant context.

On this basis, firstly, the study contends that there must be more grounds, beyond the absence of a main character based on a historical person of color, to justify the reading that *Hamilton*

**Moekoe, Setiawan:**

Hamilton: An American Founding Father—or an Other?

glorifies the founding father mythology, or that ‘true’ representation of people of color is nonexistent in *Hamilton*. Secondly, the study proposes that Hamilton himself, that is, the character as an element of the musical, is coded as the other.

**Hamilton: An American Other**

The start of the musical summarizes the start of Alexander Hamilton’s life in *Alexander Hamilton* (Miranda, 2016, p. 16). In this opening number, Hamilton is introduced as “a bastard, orphan, son of a whore”, “impoverished, in squalor”, and “another immigrant comin’ up from the bottom.” Interestingly, the song also laments, in a fourth-wall-breaking moment: “America forgot him.” These descriptors set Hamilton up as the outsider. In contrast, the majority of those who surround him—especially as his career advances and he secures a marriage into a well-off family—embody the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon American settlers of good socio-economic standing; who are freed to operate as ‘self’. Throughout the play, Hamilton continues to be depicted as the distinct ‘other’ to the society’s ‘self’, as is to be explored anon in the analysis.

The fact that ‘the real Hamilton’ was white should not be seen as sufficient argument against the fictional Hamilton being purposely coded as an other. Aside from the word immigrant being invoked with emphasis, and mostly pride, in the musical—“*Immigrants: // We get the job done.*” (Miranda, 2016, p. 121)—there are many ways the author portrays Hamilton as a clear victim of othering. Although Hamilton *the character* still belongs to the ‘white race’ in the fictional setting, this does not mean he is exempt from becoming othered—such would be a most reductive take. After all, even today, the American society relegates those who do not fit into the ‘WASP’ (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) mold as ‘the other’. Examples include Jewish Americans (Meenes, 1941; Goldblatt, 2003), Mexican Americans (Greenfield & Kates, 1975), Italian Americans (Mangione & Morreale, 1992; Bertellini, 2004), American immigrants (Epps & Furman, 2016), or Americans who identify as LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and related communities) (Casey et al., 2019). All these groups have historically been discriminated against, some more severely than others. To deny this or, worse, to claim they do not qualify—which implies a stratification of suffering and discrimination—is to trivialize and dismiss injustices faced by real people; which only serves to create a divide amongst groups that are already a minority and mostly viewed by the majority in an antagonistic light. To highlight another commonality, albeit an unfortunate one, these groups have also received stereotypical descriptors, and even slurs—another trademark technique of othering which reduces human beings to objects or negative traits. Even when the group in question contains mostly ‘white’ people, certain traits will be assigned to them in order to create a sense that they are inherently ‘different’; other. Similarly, despite the character’s race, *Hamilton* portrays Hamilton *the character* as an other by highlighting that he hailed from the Caribbean, and that he is not a descendant of British settlers who had already made a home in America; therefore validating his oft-invoked status as an ‘immigrant’: *Alexander Hamilton* (p. 16), *Yorktown* (p. 121), *The World Was Wide Enough* (p. 272), among others. This is heightened by the fact that Hamilton has not a cent to his name; no ownership of a land, or kinship to a known family. He is—the play asserts, by the standards of the people at that time, especially considering the circles he operated in—an indisputable other.

More important than any status, Alexander Hamilton is an other because such is how he is treated all throughout the play. He is repeatedly singled-out as an immigrant by rivals. The clearest evidence to this—that Hamilton is otherized, especially throughout his career—can be seen through closer examination of his relationship with those who safely stand as ‘the self’ to Hamilton’s ‘other’. One such character was Thomas Jefferson, who never hid his dislike for and othering of Hamilton (Miranda, 2016, p. 192). Jefferson, as well as Hamilton’s other rivals, constantly belittled Hamilton and credited any success he had to the backing of Washington (p. 193), who is the polar opposite of Hamilton in terms of circumstance, as Hamilton points out in

*Meet Me Inside* (p. 104): “Well, I don’t have your name. / I don’t have your titles. / I don’t have your land.” Jefferson further blames Hamilton for the fact that the politicians were all split into different sides and factions (p.199)—even though this is what happens in virtually every political endeavor. Though he admits that it is not just Hamilton who is causing and deepening the rift between the politicians, Jefferson insists Hamilton is a threat, as if seeing something sinister specifically in him, while others play the game the same way and merit no such accusations. This could thus be seen as a subconscious fear and dislike of Hamilton; borne from seeing him as an outsider, foreigner, an other. When this and many other plot points are considered throughout the play, regardless of historicity, it is clear that the play paints Hamilton as a stand-in for the other, as the abuse and oppositions he faces ring so familiar to those experienced by the othered. As Miranda’s editor Jeremy McCarter writes, “Hamilton is the prototype of the immigrant striver (hard-working, ambitious, desperate to prove himself)” (p. 38). As such, Alexander Hamilton and his experiences stand as the embodiment of the other.

## CONCLUSION

Although *Hamilton* may not have as basis a real-life historical figure who was a clearer victim of othering, being treated as an other remains an ever-present fact that follows Hamilton *the character* all his life, haunting and casting its shadow on any endeavor he undertakes. As such, any member of the audience who knows what it is to be the other would recognize this underlying theme that persists throughout the play. The historical Hamilton, like other figures who lent their names to the main cast, may not be the most obvious avatars for a story about the reclamation of America by the American *other*—yet *Hamilton* is undeniably a story of the other and their experiences. In this manner, *Hamilton* the play places the other front and center; casting the founding father as the other, and the other as the *self* of the text.

## REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002). *The empire writes back*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Billboard Staff. (2015, December 15). Billboard.com's 25 best albums of 2015: Critics' picks. *Billboard.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.billboard.com/>
- Bell, J., & Chicurel, S. R. (2008). *Music theory for musical theatre*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Bertellini, G. (2004). Black hands and white hearts: Italian immigrants as 'urban racial types' in early American film culture. *Urban History* 31(3), 375-399.
- Boardman, M. (2017, August 17). 50 celebrities who love ‘Hamilton’. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://ew.com/gallery/celebrities-who-love-hamilton/>
- Brantley, B. (2015). Review: ‘Hamilton,’ young rebels changing history and theater. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/>
- Broadway.com Staff. (2016, June 13). Hamilton dominates 2016 Tony Awards but just short of record; complete list of winners. *Broadway.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.broadway.com/>
- Brown, M. (2018, April 8). Revolutionary musical *Hamilton* takes home seven Olivier awards. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/>
- Casey, L. S., Reisner, S. L., Findling, M. G., Blendon, R. J., Benson, J. M., Sayde, J. M., & Miller, C. (2019). Discrimination in the United States: Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Americans. *Health Services Research* 54(Suppl 2), 1454-1466. doi: 10.1111/1475-6773.13229
- Epps, D., & Furman, R. (2016). The ‘alien other’: A culture of dehumanizing immigrants in the United States. *Social Work & Society* 14(2), 1-14.

**Moekoe, Setiawan:**  
Hamilton: An American Founding Father—or an Other?

- Fleishman, J. (2017, August 16). With racial clashes rattling the country, the ‘Hamilton’ message of inclusion marches on. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/>
- Foucault, M. (2013). *History of madness*. J. Khalifa (Ed.). London, UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Goldblatt, R. (2003). As plain as the nose on your face: the nose as the organ of othering. *American Studies* 48(4), 563-576.
- Grant, S. (2016, June 23). 23 celebs who’ve seen Hamilton (and you aren’t one of them). *MTV.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/2896818/celebs-whove-seen-hamilton-broadway-musical/>
- Greenfield, G. A., & Kates, D. B., Jr. (1975). Mexican Americans, racial discrimination, and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. *California Law Review* 63(3), 662-731.
- Gregory, D. (2004). *The Colonial Present*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hamilton*, by Lin-Manuel Miranda. (n.d.) *The Pulitzer Prizes*. Retrieved from <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/lin-manuel-miranda>
- Hart, J., & Goldie, T. (1993). Post-colonial theory. In I. R. Makaryk, L. Hutcheon, P. Perron (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of contemporary literary theory: approaches, scholars, terms* (pp. 155-158). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Hatcher, J. (1996). *The art & craft of playwriting*. Cincinnati, OH: Story Press.
- Kennedy, J. F. (1958). *A nation of immigrants*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Knapp, R. (2005). *The American musical and the formation of national identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lyubansky, M. (2008). Prejudice lessons from the Xavier Institute. In R. S. Rosenberg, Ph.D. & J. Canzoneri (Eds.), *The psychology of superheroes: An unauthorized exploration* (pp. 75-90). Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.
- Magness, P. W. (2017). Alexander Hamilton as immigrant: Musical mythology meets federalist reality. *The Independent Review* 21(4), 497-508.
- Mangione, J., & Morreale, B. (1992). *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Mead, R. (2015, September 25). Why Donald Trump and Jeb Bush should see “Hamilton”. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/>
- Meenes, M. (1941). American Jews and Anti-Semitism. *Department of Psychology Faculty Publications* 3, 557-566.
- Milvy, E. (2016, June 22). Hamilton's teenage superfans: 'This is, like, crazy cool'. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/>
- Miranda, L. (2015). *Hamilton* [Recorded by Original Broadway cast of *Hamilton*]. [Music album]. New York, NY: Atlantic Recording Corporation.
- Miranda, L. (2016). *Hamilton: The revolution*. J. McCarter (Ed.). New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing.
- Monteiro, L. D. (2016). Race-conscious casting and the erasure of the black past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*. *The Public Historian* 38(1), 89-98.
- Nichols, A. (2016, July 29). You should be terrified that people who like “Hamilton” run our country. *Current Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://www.currentaffairs.org/>
- Owen, K. (2017). Can great art also be great history? *The Independent Review* 21(4), 509-517.
- Patriotism on Broadway. (2015, December 16). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2015/12/16/patriotism-on-broadway/>
- Piepenburg, E. (2016, June 12). Why ‘Hamilton’ has heat. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/>
- Reed, I. (2020). *The haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda*. Brooklyn, NY: PowerHouse Books.
- Remarks by the president at “Hamilton at the White House”. (2016, March 14). Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/14/remarks-president-hamilton-white-house>

- Romano, R. C., Potter, C. B., Hogeland, W., Freeman, J. B., Monteiro, L. D., Harris, L. M., . . . , Herrera, P. (2018). R. C. Romano & C. B. Potter (Eds.). *Historians on Hamilton: How a blockbuster musical is restaging America's past*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Saïd, E. W. (1987). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Van Evra, J. (2019, October 10). Hamilton: 15 fascinating facts about the biggest musical of all time. *CBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/blog/>
- Vine, H. (2017, August 5). This inspiring *Hamilton* fan art from around the world will blow you away. *Playbill*. Retrieved from <https://www.playbill.com/article/this-inspiring-hamilton-fan-art-from-around-the-world-will-blow-you-away>
- Weitz, M. (1971). The content of form: a commentary. *New Literary History*, 2(2), 351-356. doi: 10.2307/468608
- White, S. (2015, October 29). The other New York Hamilton. *Observer*. Retrieved from <https://observer.com/>