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A “Model” American Musical

Hamilton and the Rise of Model Minorities

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What constitutes a model American musical? What does it sound like and look like? Whose story does it tell? In what color(s) does it manifest? Is it a blockbuster? Is it politically pluralist? Is it school- and family-friendly? Who does it empower? Before *Hamilton*, these questions would lead to a series of more or less similar answers, as canonical Broadway musicals in each historical period have displayed identifiable patterns. *Hamilton*, the dark-horse game changer on the Great White Way, however, seems to not follow any established pattern of the past, and has thus been described as “revolutionary,” “ingenious,” and “changing the face of Broadway.” Its massive multimedia success has quickly canonized it as a model Broadway musical, with imitators on the rise. Addressing the above questions, this chapter submits three “models” that define *Hamilton* as an ideal American musical. First, it is a model cultural commodity on multiple political fronts: rendering race ambiguous, it appeals to the typical Broadway audience; promoting utopian fantasies, it enchants the underprivileged. Second, it puts forth a model history education tool. Its “model history” lauds white Founding Fathers, applauds American exceptionalism, and downplays atrocities suffered by its disenfranchised people. Last but not least, it facilitates the rise of model minorities—the elitist people-of-color who thrive in a neoliberal society where individuals do not stand on a fair playground. I coin this reparative term to elucidate the key relationship between *Hamilton* and the minority population in the times of neoliberalism.

A Model Cultural Commodity on Multiple Political Fronts

Hamilton is one of the hottest and toughest tickets to get that Broadway has ever seen. Since its opening on Broadway on August 6, 2015 after a sold-out

their stories with larger communities, and consequently put particularly underprivileged students in jeopardy as they further their academic and artistic careers? In the next section, I propose the term “model minorities” in response to the much-criticized mythic term originated in the civil rights movement—“model minority”—to elucidate the key relationship between minorities and *Hamilton*.

The Rise of Model Minorities in the Times of Neoliberalism

A model commodity and model for history education, *Hamilton* was the idea of model minorities, who occupy the liminal space between those who dominate American society and its neoliberal system and underprivileged minorities on the losing side of the battle. As a result of the global triumph of neoliberalism, model minorities are, on the one hand, among the elite in our society, and, on the other, aware of the subjugation of minorities in the United States. The term “model minorities” introduces the possibility of not only confronting a disconcerting social system built on self-interest and violence but also endeavor toward the emancipation of the less fortunate.

“Model minorities” is both a critique of and reparation of the term “model minority,” which was coined in the 1960s by conservatives to not only shore up the capitalist invention that any individual can overcome hardship to succeed in American society, but also to suppress the minorities and drive a wedge between different racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States. The term was first seen in two news articles published in 1966.²⁹ The model minority myth posits that Asian Americans—often meaning East, South, and selected Southeast Asian immigrants—are hardworking, well-educated, politically unthreatening, and have high income and low crime rates.³⁰ It also implies that racial and ethnic minorities other than Asian Americans are lazy and intractable. The incubation and circulation of such a stereotypical concept in the late 1960s was an important attempt for conservatives to deny the revolutionary claim of the Black Power Movement that U.S. society is fundamentally racist and structured to keep minorities in a subordinate position; and that the subordination of minorities is key to the success of the nation and the emancipation of its elite.

An instrument to maintain white supremacy and dominance, the term “model minority” is racially oppressive. It justifies white subjugation over Asians by implying that Asian Americans as a minority are not underprivileged due to their education and economic status and therefore do not merit

resources or investment in U.S. society. In fact, the model minority stereotype does not apply equally to all Asian ethnic subgroups, which differ substantially in their economic and political histories, languages, and cultures, immigration patterns, and levels of assimilation. Moreover, the “model minority” tag allows the public to dismiss alarming statistics of abominable white racism on Asian Americans, and in order to succeed in white-dominated institutions Asian Americans must internalize the model minority stereotype and reject their own Asian heritages and cultures.³¹

Hamilton characterizes its titular character as a smart, hardworking, well-educated, and over-achieving immigrant with a humble upbringing. All of these qualities align with the 1960s fabrication of the model minority myth except that Alexander Hamilton never fell victim to any form of racial oppression. Portrayed by Miranda himself and other actors of color, the character took on a much more credible and relatable aura as an immigrant who relied on his intelligence and diligence to move upward. However, to even distantly equate a white Anglo-Saxon American of a slave-owning family with the “permanent foreigners” in American society who face explicit and implicit racism on a daily basis is to unabashedly disregard material inequality and racial violence, and to perpetuate the disconcerting but sustaining idea that racial disparities in American society are caused by individual underperformance.

“Model minorities” is far more than simply a plural form of “model minority.” First of all, it originates from the opposing end of the political spectrum to that of the latter. In lieu of disguising the racist nature of U.S. society, it exposes that suppressing minorities is fundamental to the notion of freedom and the American Dream. Second, rather than discrediting the elite minorities and critiquing their achievements, the term denounces the neoliberal social engineering that innately directs everyone to the path of “model” success, the danger of which lies in the perpetuation and permanent obfuscation of structural racism and the triumph of the neoliberal myth that anyone who “works harder as a self-starter” will naturally be a winner. Third, it is a reparative concept that brings together those who resist structural racism, “model” narratives, and “white” norms under the enduring neoliberal regime. Unlike “model minority,” “model minorities” condemns the pitting of racial and ethnic minorities against one another, and strives, in both minute and consequential ways, to alter the power dynamics built upon systemic oppression.

Upward mobility of an “immigrant” is a central thread in *Hamilton*. In the musical, the newly founded country—especially New York—is romanticized as the land of freedom: Hamilton sings, “[America] is a place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up”;³² everyone sings, “In New York you can be a new man.”³³ Hamilton’s endeavor to “rise up” is seen

not only in the character’s tenacity, as “[h]e will do what it takes to survive”; but also in the historical figure’s financial and political visions that leaned toward private ownership, elitist finance and governing, and state-endorsed expansion.³⁴ These visions coincided with neoliberalism, the post-70s form of free-market capitalism that favors competition, privatization, financialization, and state-sponsored growth.³⁵ A neoliberal society is an “enterprise society” based on self-interest, inequality, insecurity, and the privilege of the individual, where all spheres of existence are measured in economic terms, and human beings are regarded as capital whose labor is extracted to draw investments.³⁶ In recent years the violence of neoliberalism has caught many scholars’ attention. Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* engages with the contemporary prevalence of crisis brought by neoliberalism as it wears out the fantasies of the good life promised by the liberal state.³⁷ Patricia Ybarra in *Latinx Theatre in the Times of Neoliberalism* examines the neoliberal global capitalism as a mode of violence and warns us that “our dependence on individual liberalism and our ignorance of the violence of neoliberalism are destructive and dangerous.”³⁸ Andrea Micocci and Flavia Di Mario submit that neoliberalism is akin, intellectually, economically, politically, and individually, to fascism, as it offers an outlook that thoroughly directs individual actions through repression.³⁹

In a neoliberal society operating upon inequality and individual privilege, individualistic achievements are magnified as the only way out of impoverishment and into the elite class. In the same vein, Hamilton would do anything he could to “rise up” and eventually built a “financial system [that] is a work of genius” and “took our country from bankruptcy to prosperity.”⁴⁰ Contrary to the utopian fantasies promoted by the musical, however, individuals in a neoliberal society do not stand on a fair playground and the disenfranchised do not often get “a shot” for themselves to even ponder about “not throwing away.”⁴¹ Neoliberalism has resulted in this particular group of “model minorities,” characterized by their effort to reduce their perceived distance economically, politically, and intellectually from elite whiteness, their conformity to “model” narratives and social mechanisms, and their ambivalence to altering the power dynamics built upon structural subjugation.

Ironically, the neoliberal society dictates that becoming model minorities is perhaps the only peaceful way out of poverty for the minoritarian population that provides temporary escape from systemic oppression. *Hamilton*’s model minorities are Miranda and the cast members of color who devised the musical and brought it to life. Their immense critical and commercial success—including Tony Awards won by Leslie Odom, Renée Elise Goldsberry, Daveed Diggs, and Miranda himself—quickly elevated them to positions of power

rare for U.S. artists of color. These minoritarian artists, especially Miranda, have in turn created an abundance of opportunities for other artists of color and inspired an increasing presence of bodies of color on stage and screen.

As a model commodity, a model history education tool, and a model minorities show, *Hamilton* is a “model” American musical. The rise of model minorities and the gradual shifting of power dynamics might further change the prospects of what a future model American musical might look like. As history would have it, William Hamilton (1773–1836), a free Black political leader and the rumored son of Alexander Hamilton and a slave, was a true revolutionary manumission abolitionist. A trained carpenter, he used writing to empower himself, the way the elder Hamilton did. As reported by David Walstreicher and Jeffrey L. Pasley, William Hamilton’s activism began as early as 1796, when he wrote to Governor John Jay ferociously declaring what an irony and false contradiction it was that Americans spoke of the “land of liberty and equality” when “almost every part of it abounds with slavery and oppression.”⁴² In 1827, in commemorating the end of slavery in New York, William Hamilton condemned Jefferson’s hypocrisy, racism, and bigotry, calling him an “ambidexter philosopher.”⁴³ William Hamilton was the first president of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, chaired the fourth annual National Negro Convention in New York in 1834, and published several orations for Black celebrations of the end of slavery. None of Hamilton’s biographers or the Founders Chic historians—except Chernow, who makes a very brief mention of this Hamilton in his book—cared to spend time on this important but little-known revolutionary figure. However, it is an understatement to say his fascinating life and work, his truly polemic spirit, and his convoluted connections with the Hamiltons deserve center stage, perhaps the Broadway stage. How many generations will it take for a musical about the likes of William Hamilton to become the next model American musical?

Notes

1. “Weekly Grosses for *Hamilton*,” Internet Broadway Database, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/hamilton-499521#Statistics>, accessed March 12, 2020; and Dawn Chmielewski, “Lin Manuel Miranda’s ‘Hamilton’ Crashes Broadway’s Billion-Dollar Club,” *Forbes*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dawnchmielewski/2020/06/08/lin-manuel-mirandas-hamilton-crashes-broadways-billion-dollar-cul/?sh=47b3933b5b3c>, accessed December 29, 2020.
2. See Amy Petersen Jensen, *Theatre in a Media Culture: Production, Performance and Perception Since 1970* (London: McFarland & Company, 2007), 4. See also Jessica Hillman-McCord, “Digital Fandom: Hamilton and the Participatory Spectator,”