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Who Gets to Play What?: Representation in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* and Ryan

Coogler's *Black Panther*

In the upbeat, refreshing twist on American history, *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda recounts the life of founding father Alexander Hamilton by fusing modern-day American culture with the past to such a degree that inspires a newfound regard for American government and history among audiences. To portray white, historical figures such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in *Hamilton*, Miranda surprisingly casts black and Hispanic actors and actresses. On the contrary, in *Black Panther*, the perception of African Americans begins with powerful, superior individuals who exist separately from the common-wealth and solely express concern for the well-being of the African nation, Wakanda, but eventually share their prosperity with the rest of mankind. A great majority of the characters are played by African Americans, and they are represented in a way that elevates their position on the social ladder. Although the two texts differ dramatically, both give the impression that they want to alter the stereotypes often placed on minority groups such as African Americans. In *Hamilton*, African Americans and Latinos are given the opportunity to represent American founding fathers—men who hold significant power, sparking a state of disbelief, which highlights how uncommonly people of color are deemed important and commanding. *Black Panther* emphasizes this idea simply by the reactions it provokes among African Americans. African Americans take away feelings of empowerment and strength because this is the first time they see themselves as the superheroes

instead of villains. The choice of both texts to include members of underrepresented communities as leaders pushes for a change in the way race is used to determine how people are perceived in not simply the entertainment industry, but also American society.

The casting of minority actors and actresses in the musical *Hamilton* suggests a desire to alter the way we think of race and ethnicity in theater. In other words, the portrayal of white historical figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton by black and Hispanic actors challenges the divisive social norm that calls for the casting of primarily Caucasian performers. Miranda's intentional assignment of diverse actors and actresses to depict dead, white men prompts the audience to think about how infrequently people of color are given the option to play both multicultural characters and characters who are historically white. To explain further, Patricia Herrera states that, minority groups, particularly Latinos and African Americans, "are often times on the other side of the judicial paradigm—behind bars" (Herrera). Only on occasion do people of color make an appearance "in the center as lawmakers" (Herrera), contrasting to white individuals in which "culture reflects not only [them] but nearly infinite versions of [them]" (Smith). In the same way, the selection of a predominantly black cast in *Black Panther* accentuates this idea by rebelling against the typical, limited variety roles African Americans play. Although their capability of playing strong, heroic characters may parallel, or even exceed that of a white individual, African Americans fail to receive many chances to showcase their skills across different genres of film in the same fashion as white actors and actresses. With that said, *Black Panther* provides African Americans with an outlet to express themselves through a series of empowering and inspiring moments; permitting them to voice their struggles and triumphs, which is a concept they are moderately unfamiliar with due to the bias Americans hold towards non-traditional selection methods with regards to the

entertainment industry. According to Smith, “those of us who are not white have considerably more trouble not only finding representation of ourselves in mass media and other arenas of public life, but also finding representation that indicates that our humanity is multifaceted” (Smith). Both texts consider this argument and embrace America’s diverse nature by integrating the faces of several groups that are often forgotten.

Correspondingly, the diverse selection of actors and actresses in *Hamilton* signifies an attempt to include traditionally underrepresented communities in a narrative they are often excluded from. When Miranda incorporates America’s unique, varied society in the detailed account of the founding fathers, he encourages their acceptance and participation by expressing the necessity for the elimination of a racial stratification in a melting pot. Herrera acknowledges this attempt by stating that Miranda’s inclusion “[supports] diverse artists and [provides] an open mic to any and all” (Herrera). The presence of the social hierarchy in America creates difficulty amongst “racially inferior” individuals in terms of how well they can assimilate into American culture, particularly when natural born citizens choose to disregard their residency and refuse to consider them Americans. Simultaneously, the large number of black individuals starring in *Black Panther*, a film concerning superheroes, suggests that African Americans desire a certain recognition from society because they have the potential, as much as any other American, to become excellent and proficient people regardless of the obstacles put in place to oppress them. As reported by Nicole Hallberg, *Black Panther* “asks [audiences] what vital contributions to technology, politics, and culture the African nations never got to make because of the effects of colonization” (Hallberg). This is especially significant because black individuals continue to be overlooked by many separate cultures due to common misconceptions regarding their disposition and abilities but, ironically, were never given the chance to demonstrate their nature or talents to

begin with. Nonetheless, most African Americans seek nothing but a sense of unity and appreciation between them and the remainder of society. *Black Panther* encompasses this concept in hopes of “crushing injustices and defeats that can so easily dominate the conversation about race relations in America” (Hallberg). The film serves to inspire members of other racial groups to form different opinions on what African Americans have to offer society.

Representation in *Hamilton* and *Black Panther* imitates America’s current state, a nation of many races and ethnicities, with the intention of reaching not simply underrepresented communities in hopes of inspiring their participation, but also overrepresented communities to aid them in the process of welcoming different groups that aspire to participate.

Furthermore, multicultural actors and actresses in the musical *Hamilton* suggest a desire to adopt a positive image of non-white individuals in America. When Miranda repeatedly mentions Alexander Hamilton’s immigrant ranking, along with the resilience and determination it took on Hamilton’s part for him to become such an influential character in American history, he inspires the audience to reflect on immigrants in general and how they aspire to achieve their own version of greatness in respect to America. The nation is comprised of immigrants, and although many immigrants originate from imperfect situations and encounter hardships that are seemingly difficult to overcome, they work hard to establish themselves and assist American society with services it—every so often—fails to properly appreciate. As stated by Herrera, the musical “makes visible the Afro-diasporic significance in American History in the face of a larger society that rarely recognizes it” (Herrera). By the same token, African Americans in *Black Panther* illustrate the contribution black individuals make to America, and despite the labels and discrimination constantly formed against them, they continue to prove themselves which incites the audience to reflect on how irrelevant a lighter complexion is to the influence

they may have on society. The film highlights black excellence by illustrating the possible achievements of African Americans in the face of evil, and “flips our American perceptions of Africa on their heads by giving us a world free from colonial influences, flourishing, powerful, and proud” (Hallberg). Few people acknowledge the degree to which non-white individuals provide for America, and both *Hamilton* and *Black Panther* include accurate portrayals of how much they help accomplish. With that in mind, it would not be unfair to suggest that these individuals receive a legitimate chance at success.

In the final analysis, Miranda’s and Coogler’s choice to cast mainly culturally diverse actors and actresses in *Hamilton* and *Black Panther* calls attention to the challenges surrounding specific minority groups and immigrants in America. Thus, the selection of multicultural actors and actresses in the musical and African American performers in the film signal not merely the inclusion of traditionally underrepresented communities in American society, but also toward greater issues of racial inequality in the entertainment industry, and toward the adoption of a pro-diversity attitude in America. From Miranda’s perspective, it appears, his ability to accommodate modern-day Americans in terms of equal representation among ethnicities in *Hamilton* should set a standard for what America should strive to accomplish time and time again. As for Coogler’s viewpoint, one can infer that the rationale behind his selection of a majority black cast lies somewhere between efforts to “[shine] a bright light on the psychic scars of slavery’s legacy and how black Americans endure the real-life consequences of it in the present day,” (Smith) generate “the most productive responses to bigotry... by [celebrating] what those who choose to prohibit equal representation and rights are ignoring,” (Smith) and provide a way for African Americans to explore identities that, seemingly, were not originally intended for them.

Works Cited

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