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# *Hamilton, Democracy, and Theatre in America*

Patricia Herrera

University of Richmond, [pherrera@richmond.edu](mailto:pherrera@richmond.edu)

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## ***Hamilton, Democracy, and Theatre in America***

*Pedagogy Notebook* is a **monthly blog series** that serves as a pedagogical resource for educators and scholars looking to incorporate Latina/o theatre into the classroom. In *Pedagogy Notebook*, artists, educators, and scholars share their process and work in the classroom, plus overall reflections on their pedagogy. This series offers a glimpse into different methods of engaging with and teaching Latina/o theatre at the university level.

I, along with University of Richmond professors Lázaro Lima and Laura Browder, received an **National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Library Association Latino Americans** grant this year to organize the **Latinos in Richmond** program, which coincided with two classes that we taught this spring: the **Tocqueville Seminar** “Performing Latino USA: Democracy, Demography, and Equality” and the First-Year Seminar “**Telling Richmond’s Latino Stories: A Community Documentary Project.**” Since the goal of both courses was to explore how Latinos—the nation’s largest “minority” group in a representative democracy like America—is also the most underrepresented, I was interested in understanding *Hamilton* through a democratic lens.

**Weaving a hip hop sensibility into the fabric of the American musical tradition means threading through Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical, oral, visual, and dance forms and practices. *Hamilton* makes visible the Afro-diasporic significance in American history in the face of a larger society that rarely recognizes it. 🐦 *Hamilton* makes visible the Afro-diasporic significance in American history in the face of a larger society that rarely recognizes it.”>f**

To offer different forms of democratic practice, we drew from law, literature, theatre, and performance studies to examine how Latina/os have creatively engaged the politics of national belonging. For us, democratic practice was not limited to the engagement of citizens in electoral politics, but rather it paid attention to the ways communities spotlighted non-majoritarian histories and created new knowledge to advance a democratic project. In our second week of class we showed video clips of *In the Heights* and *Hamilton* and read excerpts from Harvey C. Mansfield’s *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction* (2005) alongside Cristina Beltran’s *The Trouble with Unity* (2010) to

understand Miranda's work. With Mansfield, we learned about Alexis de Tocqueville's estimation of the United States as the most advanced example of democracy in the nineteenth-century. In juxtaposition, we turned to political theorist Beltrán who focuses on the role of Latina/os in the democratic system historically perceived as the "sleeping giant," referring to an artificial person constituting many parts that come together, but who is politically passive. Activists in the seventies combatted this stereotype through **rallies, teatro, and poetry readings**, public performances that foster an open inclusive, participatory democracy of racial unity among Chicanos and Puerto Ricans. The physical claiming of public space produced a shared sense of belonging, and even political will. Though Tocqueville and Beltrán are far from the minds of contemporary theatre practitioners, it was useful to understand the potentiality of *Hamilton* as an embodied action of citizenship.

Among the many ways *Hamilton* breaks new ground, **Jonathan Mandell** noted that Miranda revolutionizes the American musical tradition with hip hop beats, polysyllabic rhymes, R&B, **clave rhythms**, and a tinge of opera and ballads. This was the most captivating aspect of *Hamilton* for my students: how Miranda could possibly use hip-hop to narrate the story of Alexander Hamilton. Hearing the opening song of *Hamilton*, students bopped their head, enamored by the flow of the rap and the beat of the song. Others mouthed the lyrics attempting to perfect the delivery of the rap. *Hamilton* is the most highly acclaimed product of a generation that positions hip hop as a cultural art form.

Weaving a hip hop sensibility into the fabric of the American musical tradition means threading through Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical, oral, visual, and dance forms and practices. *Hamilton* makes visible the Afro-diasporic significance in American history in the face of a larger society that rarely recognizes it. Thinking about hip hop as a democratic practice opens up the conversation for discussing Latina/os in hip hop, particularly Nuyoricans, or Puerto Ricans from New York City. As evidenced in Juan Flores's *From Bomba to Hip Hop* (2000) and Raquel Rivera's *New York Ricans in the Hip Hop Zone*, Puerto Ricans impressed their own cultural artistic expression into hip hop from its inception.



Students from the University of Richmond waiting for the screening of *Foreigners in their Own Land* (1565-1880), episode one of the NEH-supported documentary film *Latino Americans* to start at **Sacred Heart Center**. Photo by Michael K. Lease.

While we give a nod to hip hop, we also want to call attention to the development of a Nuyorican aesthetic coming into being at virtually the same time. The founding of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and the publication of their first poetry anthology popularized the term Nuyorican. Miranda's work is a by-product of this Nuyorican tradition that recognizes Afro-diasporic interconnections. Like hip hop, the Nuyorican aesthetic implements a democratic practice by supporting diverse artists and providing an open mic to any and all. Connecting the hip hop and Nuyorican traditions to *Hamilton* brings the presence of enslaved people from Africa to the forefront.

Miranda himself is a Nuyorican, and the cast playing the Founding Fathers are largely Black and Latina/o performers. In media, people of color are often times on the other side of the judicial paradigm—behind bars—but Miranda places them in the center as lawmakers. This racially-conscious casting tells a story bound by race, infuses afro-diasporic practices, references hip hop songs and samples, and ultimately shifts the way we understand musical theatre. This shift was definitely experienced by an Afro-Latino student who remarked how important it was for his whole family to see the production of Manuel's *In the Heights*. They shed tears because the musical gave voice to their community, their struggles, and their joys. For the first time they saw themselves on that stage.

What remains audibly silent in *Hamilton* is the violent history of slavery. While hip hop revolutionizes Broadway, Miranda is still working within a genre that limits how deep one can delve into an uncomfortable history. Though the impact of slavery is not addressed head on, with *Hamilton* getting so much attention, Miranda is poised to leverage a democratic project. He has recently called on Congress to solve the economic crisis in Puerto Rico. He parallels his request with Hamilton's plea to support relief efforts after a hurricane destroyed St. Croix. In so doing, he wittingly brings his performance of the past in conversation with the present.

As we reach the end of the semester, there is much to reflect on. Our students attended the Latinos in Richmond programs and witnessed first hand how Richmond's dichotomous black and white divide has often neglected the interconnected stories of Latinos. Our conversation about *Hamilton* resonated throughout the semester, reminding us of the function of historical memory and the work needed to restore forgotten histories. It brought us closer to re-imagining Virginia and Richmond Latina/o history, from the "Capitol of the Old South" to one of the capitols of the Global South.