



We Can't Have a Conversation about Decolonizing the Curriculum without Talking about “Hamilton: An American Musical”

By Educator Barnes – July 6, 2020

[#DecolonizeYourCurriculum](#) was the hashtag that I saw added online when my piece, “[It's Time to Revise the Curriculum; Let's Start by Adding Juneteenth](#)” was shared across social media. I was glad I put something into the world to make people think. It's easy to share a call to

action, but harder to see how you might be complicit in working against the efforts you are championing. Here is where the award-winning musical "Hamilton" enters the scene.

I love singing, and I love musicals. I watched the short-lived television show "Smash" and the new television show "Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist" because I love storytelling through music. However, as in other aspects of life, systemic racism is also prevalent in the theater. When I heard that Lin-Manuel Miranda had written a musical where the majority of the cast would be people of color, I was excited. After listening to the soundtrack, I was even more intrigued. As a person who has a degree in English education and has been an English teacher for the majority of my career, I appreciated the layers of nuance, the multiple themes, and references included in the musical. I appreciated the rap battle between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton as a forum to share some of the issues of the time, so I knew I would see the musical someday.

When students of the now-closed Broad Ripple High School had the opportunity to attend Hamilton in Chicago and needed more people to buy tickets to fill up the bus so they could go, I was in. I knew all most all of the lyrics by then and refrained from belting them out while I was in the audience. That was 2017. Fast forward to July 3, 2020, I knew I wanted to not only watch Hamilton again now that it was on Disney+, but I also wanted to participate in the viewing party. What is better than watching a show than having other people who love the show to discuss it with? That was my back up plan because my date to watch at home was my husband who is not too fond of the art and genius that is musical theater. I even recounted this in a Twitter thread before the watch party about how he sat in the lobby during part of "Wicked," the last musical we attended together.

This time, he was a model theater audience member. He stayed the entire time, but the next day we had an entire conversation about it that I wasn't expecting to have. The night before, he told me that if he wasn't married to me he would not have chosen to see "Hamilton" or any other musical for that matter. I expected this conversation to be more of the same, but it wasn't.

My husband and I both love history. The reason he ranked "Hamilton" higher than "Wicked" or any other musical he had seen was because of the historical aspect. Then, he said, "This is another story about white people fighting for power and all the dirty things they did to get it and keep it. Did we really need to see this story?" The question resonated with me, "Did we really need to see this story?" It made me hear two lines in the musical differently. "Every other founding father's story gets told. Every other founding father gets to grow old." That

made me think about how Alexander Hamilton's face is on the ten-dollar bill. He's immortalized on money; he's in our wallets; he grew old.

As much as I love "Hamilton," I can see how my blindspot allowed me not to see that problems with the musical despite all the visibility it gave to performers of color. Where are the Indigenous people? This is a topic [Dr. Adrienne Keene](#), a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, explores in a piece she wrote "[Where are the Natives in Hamilton?](#)" on the forum [Native Appropriations](#). I understand in a dramatization you can't include everything, but this is Indigenous erasure. Although slavery was referenced in the musical, there are some people who have expressed concern and disdain for people of color playing slave owners.

How does this all tie back into decolonizing the curriculum? Decolonizing the curriculum is hard work; it is nuanced work. It can't simply be done by throwing people of color into the curriculum. As much I believe Lin-Manuel Miranda is a lyrical genius and talented writer, I agree with my husband's assertion that this is not the story that needed to be told at this level. This makes decolonizing the curriculum complicated work because we are pushing to add more and making a determination on what needs to be eliminated or lessened.

Now, when I consider the full title "Hamilton: An American Musical," I will forever wonder about the stories that were left out. Where are the Black stories? Where are the Indigenous stories? Even as a child, my dad would challenge what I learned in school by reminding me that the Black perspective, or another group of color, was missing ... of course, he was quick to find a resource to fill the deficits of not seeing myself as much as I should in what I was learning in school.

Even Lin-Manuel Miranda addressed a person's question about how "Hamilton" fits into society today with the current climate of protest and the prevalence of the Black Lives Matters movement. Today, I do not offer a solid answer forward, but I assert, that we can't take the work of decolonizing the curriculum lightly, and we must accept that we might get it wrong. The fear of getting it wrong is not a good enough reason not to try. Moving forward, I will remember my husband's inquiry and ask myself, "Is this the story that needs to be told?"

Tune in to Brazen Education at 3 PM on Tuesday, July 7, 2020, where I will continue the conversation about decolonizing education.