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**Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*:
Silenced Women's Voices and
Founding Mothers of Color
A Critical Race Theory Counterstory**

Vanessa Vollmann

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Prologue

Lin-Manuel Miranda's Founding Father story *Hamilton* does not intuitively read as a political text but, first and foremost, as a vastly entertaining and artistically inspiring piece of art that does all the expectations of a Broadway musical exceptional justice. So, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Feminism (CRF) as the analytical frameworks to investigate race relations and gender bias in this text are not initially evident. This is even more true since contemporaneous events have catapulted CRT and CRF to become topics that concern the highest level of government since President Trump's 2020 Executive Order 13950.¹ And this is even though these theoretical frameworks were initially developed in the 1980s to investigate racial discrimination in the US justice system and have only ever been explored in university studies at a graduate level. Now, they have become framed as "a subversive set of ideas" (Crenshaw qtd. in Fortin) or "divisive and anti-American" ("Memorandum"), to name just a few labels. In March 2022, Judge Ketanji Jackson Brown became the first African American woman to be nominated for the Supreme Court and even she had to answer questions on CRT during her Senate hearing.

And yet, aside from all the bluster and partisan gaslighting, we find in *Hamilton* a unique composition: A Broadway musical that makes good on all the promises of its genre in being an allegory for show business in general, including the glamor, brashness, and carefree fun this specific form of stage entertainment is known for. At the same time, when decoded, it becomes a political text regarding race relations, not least because it is a US Founding Father story performed by people of Color. As such, it can be read as a template to critique the institution of slavery in the US and a text that specifically speaks to gender representation.²

One structural idiosyncrasy in *Hamilton* is particularly indicative of gender representation, namely that the women in the show go by their first names, Eliza, Angelica,

1 Trump's Executive Order 13950 on 22 September 2020 directed how executive departments and agencies were to handle government-funded diversity programs in the future, and it was based on a Memorandum dated 4 September 2022. In it, CRT was framed as being an integral part of diversity training at all levels of government-funded measures focused on racial and gender equality. But CRT had never been that. Interestingly, the Memorandum had itself been preceded by an interview on Fox News that had aired on 2 September 2022 calling on President Trump to issue an Executive Order about the abolishment of CRT from diversity training. CRT has since become increasingly framed incorrectly in conservative right-wing narratives on race relations even after President Biden immediately revoked Trump's Executive Order when he took office (Executive Order 13985).

2 *Hamilton* is a text written in a heteronormative binary understanding. I understand the terms 'male,' 'female,' 'masculine,' 'feminine,' 'man,' and 'woman' or their plurals used in this investigation to include anyone who identifies with them as I consider the gender binary system to be "inaccurate and pernicious" (26), to borrow the feminist scholar Kate Manne's words.

Sally, Maria, and Theodosia. At the same time, the men are referred to by their surnames. It is this disparity that first pointed me to historically contextualizing the female characters if the application of the CRT and CRF lenses was to uncover marginalization regarding race and gender. This is because calling the female characters by their first names allots to audiences a familiarity that it does not when it comes to the male characters. By contrast, the male characters are awarded more status and deference merely by being referred to by their surnames.³ In *Hamilton*, this discursive gap affects the construction of all the female characters in the show from the first song onwards. This is despite the fact that they, equal to the male characters, are also based on historical people. At the same time, the gap literally enshrines the mythological imagination that US culture has granted the historical male founders.

It is, of course, not surprising that the men who wrote the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence have become mythologized over the centuries and that they are familiar to most Americans in this mythological imagining. After all, these documents continue to impact and inspire social movements, nation-building, and revolutions all around the world, even some two and half centuries later. However, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, and, in this specific case, Alexander Hamilton, were also mortal men. Therefore, it is all the more noteworthy that a framer story, like *Hamilton*, which speaks precisely to the humanity and fallibility of these men, does not close this discursive gap by referring to them by their first names. It actually widens the gap from a gender perspective because the women are *not* granted the same “mark of respect” (Glaser) that precludes the presumption of familiarity regarding the male characters.

Given that the historical legacies of Eliza Schuyler Hamilton, Angelica Schuyler Church, Maria Reynolds, Sally Hemings, and Theodosia Burr are far *less* known to the public than those of the historical men, this assumption of *more* familiarity aids a silencing of their stories. Paired with the heteronormative patriarchal frame of the Broadway musical genre, an expansion on historical evidence when decoding race- and gender-related bias was therefore considered pertinent at several points in this investigation. To this end, the extensive exploration of historical evidence makes the women’s stories visible, as it debunks assumptions surrounding Alexander Hamilton’s affair with Maria Reynolds, Thomas

³ The sociologists Stav Atir and Melissa Ferguson have indicated in their research that gender continues to shape how society distributes status and deference simply by calling a person by their surname (Glaser). For example, it is common to use ‘Darwin’ and ‘Dickens’ when referring to Charles Darwin and Charles Dickens, but Marie Curie and Emily Dickinson, women who have indeed acquired the right to be likewise respected, are usually not referred to as ‘Curie’ and ‘Dickinson’ in the public discourse (Glaser). The same goes for Shakespeare versus Jane Austen (Glaser). Even in today’s political arena, it is more likely to refer to men by only their surnames, like Putin and Trump. On the other hand, women in the same space are referred to as Hillary Clinton, Angela Merkel, or Maxine Waters (Andrew).

Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, Alexander Hamilton's relationship with his sister-in-law Angelica Schuyler, as well as the reason behind the Hamilton-Burr duel which involves Theodosia Burr's relationship to her father. Above all, this was considered necessary to contextualize and decode the bias stemming from the 2004 biography *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow, the primary text that inspired Miranda to write *Hamilton*. When using CRT and CRF as lenses to analyze social norms, both contemporary and historical, these theoretical tools uncover

a way of seeing, attending to, accounting for, tracing, and analyzing the ways that race [and gender] is produced, the ways that racial [and gender] inequality is facilitated, and the ways that [US] history has created these inequalities. (Crenshaw qtd. in Fortin)

Therefore, it is crucial to take into account the legacies of the historical women when reading this Broadway masterpiece through these lenses, both as a unique piece of art as well as a political text.

From Chapter 2.2 Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Feminism, and Counterstorytelling

Martinez' extension of CRT loops back to especially Richard Delgado, Derrick A. Bell, and Patricia J. Williams' scholarship and considers their work as foundational for the research of Gloria Gladson-Billings, Daniel Solórzano, Adrienne Dixson, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Tara J. Yosso, Daniella Ann Cook, and Carmen Kynard. Martinez establishes that all

critical race theorists [...] define critical race methodology as a challenge to “majoritarian” stories or “master narratives” of white privilege. This methodology rejects notions of “neutral” research or “objective” research and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color. (3)

She then takes this a step further and differentiates between CRT as a *methodology* and a *method*. As a methodology, CRT “recognizes that experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism [and] is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (3). This methodology then includes a number of different methods, such as “family history, biography, autoethnography, *cuentos* [stories], *testimonios*²², and counterstory, [which each] empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies” (3).

Martinez' approach to counterstory sets to “relate the racial realities of people of color while also providing methods for minoritized people to challenge” (15) destructive tropes. She does this by using, for example, allegories or dialogues in which her characters engage in a “composite dialogue” (25) to convey a complex message about structural racism and “color-blind [...] abstractions” (4) and their effects in the broadest sense. Her creative approach to dialogue as a counterstory method is based on Richard Delgado's definition, which sees counterstories “as a kind of counter-reality” (qtd. in Martinez 33) to what he calls “stock

²² *Testimonios* refer to the stories of the lives of the Latina Feminist Group, “a collective of Latina feminists in higher education, [who] found it necessary to gather [...] stories of their lives [...] seeking] to resist systemic violence and cultural ideologies” (Martinez 29), which marginalized their narratives.

stories” (33).

Because, as Martinez states, “white people do not often acknowledge the experiences of people of color, [critical race theorists] have developed the methodology of counterstory to relate racial realities of people of color while also providing methods for minoritized people” (15) to challenge dominant cultural codes like myths and stock stories. The scholars Delgado, Bell, and Williams all used the method of counterstory in the form of “narrative dialogue (21)²³. Martinez’ scholarship centers the importance of what she calls “experiential knowledge” (15) as the *seventh tenet of CRT*.

In her narrative dialogues, Martinez creates composite characters who reflect Plato’s Phaedrus-Socrates relationship (37) in that a mentor and a mentee character engage in a discussion. In one example, her protagonists, two women of Color, Alejandra and Sofi, are on a road trip. Alejandra is a teacher and the mother of Sofi, who is a 17-year-old high school student. Alejandra and Sofi’s conversation on this trip is not only a book review discussion about Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With The Wind* (39–52), which reflects the intersectional nature of their unique women-of-Color identities. It is also indicative of what Martinez calls the *eighth tenet of CRT* (16), their “commitment to social justice” (16). In another example, using “Counterstory as Allegory/Fantasy,” as the chapter is called, Alejandra travels back 30 years in a time machine to a theatre-like setting in which she discusses the methodology of CRT with eight researchers who attended a conference in 1988 (64–79), critically questioning their standpoints. At the end of the conversation, she is “pulled back through time and space” (79), waking up in her bed.

Martinez argues one additional – *ninth tenet of CRT*: accessibility (18). She considers it vital for counterstory work to be accessible to “the very people it is for” (18), so it is relevant and able to affect change in the context of social justice endeavors. To her mind, it is necessary that counterstory work need always “envision a multiplicity of audiences beyond the [academic] ivory tower” (18). It is therefore absolutely critical that the works of Derrick Bell are bestsellers, that Patricia Williams’ work continues and is visible in the mainstream press, and that Richard Delgado’s research “has [...] been reworked as an introductory text for high school students” (18). For how else can insights regarding the way race-related and gender-related power systems are constructed and represented in American society be acquired, and how else can marginalization in society through the imagination of individualism, objectivity,

23 Richard Delgado used narrative dialogue in the 1995 *The Rodrigo Chronicles*, Derrick A. Bell in Geneva Crenshaw’s narrative in the 1987 *We Are Not Saved* and the 1992 *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, and Patricia J. Williams did it in her 1992 work *Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Martinez 21).

meritocracy, sexism, and White supremacy be countered than by making sure that such thoughts are accessible to the people affected and willing to make a change? Martinez' own writing process, therefore, always includes her family and non-academics because, in her words, "the work is for them, and is nearly always inspired by them" (18).

In this vein, the addendum of this text (see chapter Addendum) employs Martinez' counterstory composite character matrix and sees two protagonists engaged in a narrative dialogue about the German *Hamilton*, specifically regarding CRT tenets and reflecting the transcultural angle this dialogue presents. The addendum explores how and whether the Founding Mother of Color voice established in this book transports to a German audience or an audience in the German language. Another angle endeavors to make the existence of structural racism accessible to a dialogue partner oblivious to the systematicity of isms and to underline the continued importance of social justice work today while also addressing elements of White supremacy and fragility.

Addendum: A Martinez-Inspired Counterstory about the German *Hamilton*

The mentor character in this counterstory on the German *Hamilton* is a German woman-of-Color educator of American Studies who brings experiential knowledge to the table – both by having lived in a dominant White society for over 30 years after being born and raised in Africa as well as 20+ years of experience as an interpreter for German and English. This mentor position is contrasted against a privileged German White male point of view mentee character. I have named them Brigitte and Martin.

Brigitte and Martin's initial contact with the musical is indicative of the broad chasm between their experiences regarding intersectional racism and sexism. Brigitte has been exploring the intersectional tangents of race and gender representation in Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical academically since 2015, when it first premiered, and she went to see the musical in New York in 2017 and in Hamburg in 2022. Martin, on the other hand, has been oblivious to *Hamilton's* stellar success. Brigitte and Martin's families have been friends for many years, and he knows that she has been doing research about a Broadway musical, but they have never discussed it in detail. The only smattering he had retained over the years is that it was something about hip hop. They have gone out to dinner at a Greek restaurant on a Saturday night, and their significant others A and B are both late. Their dialogue is in three segments. The stage is set.

1 Of BLM and Dolphins

"Just because I'm saying 'Save The Whales' does not mean I'm saying 'Fuck The Dolphins,'" Brigitte says.

Martin bursts out laughing. "That's hilarious. I love it."

"It's actually not my line," she answers. "I saw it on Instagram a while ago."

Martin shakes his head and chuckles, "And I have to say that it is the best explanation I've ever heard for why 'Black Lives Matter' does not mean that every other non-Black life does *not* matter. It's just not what that particular conversation is about, right?"

"Exactly," Brigitte answers.

"Okay, I get it. Thanks for that." He chuckles again. "Shall we order a drink at least before the others get here?"

Brigitte nods. "Sure."

Martin beckons to the waiter. "I'll have a beer. And ... "

"And I'll have a glass of the house white. Thanks."

For a moment, there is a lag in the conversation and they both check their phones.

"So...", they blurt out at the same time and both chuckle again.

"A is going to here in 30." Brigitte says. "What about B?"

"She's grabbing a taxi and should be here in 20 tops. You very hungry? Or should we wait?"

"No, no. I'm fine to order in a bit. I had a late lunch."

Martin nods his agreement. "So how did we get to dolphins and Black Lives Matter, again?" he asks, picking up where we left off with a laugh. "Oh right. You were saying that you went to see that musical in Hamburg last week. And I was saying I was not sure why it's so important to you that the actors in the German production of this American hip hop musical about American history are people of Color. Except for the King. Isn't that what you said? And then we somehow got into racism in the US. And how bad the situation is over there."

Brigitte nods. "Although I'm not sure I said it's important to *me* that the actors in Hamburg are people of Color... I meant... Ah yes, thanks," she says to the waiter, and their conversation comes to a halt while he places the drinks on the table.

"I mean," Martin takes over the conversation. "Is it really that important what skin color the actors have? Isn't it more about the story? About American history? I have to tell you – and you're probably going to explain to me that I'm being racist here – I honestly do not see skin color. To me, every human is worth the same. And I honestly believe that if more people would make it less about skin color and more about..."

"Merit?" Brigitte asks a tad provocatively. She's not sure he is going to pick up on the subtle poke. And she's not even sure if she wants him to. On the other hand, why not? They are old friends, after all. And so much has changed in the past few years. Finally, conversations about race and racism and sexism, and all the other isms have reached Western society, be it in Germany or in the US. Finally, people who are not personally affected by racism and sexism, like her White male privileged friend here, no longer instantly have a defensive fragile reaction when the topic comes up. Maybe it's time for their friendship to become part of this novel reality. And maybe talking about *Hamilton* in Germany is just the ticket. After all, when it premiered in 2015, the world was a different place. Now, after #MeToo, Covid lockdowns, George Floyd's murder, the spread of the #BLM movement to all vestiges of the earth, and the Barbie movie, even Martin has understood that in order to change racist and sexist structures

in societies, the discussion is no longer centered around individual acts of bigotry. Let's do this.

"Martin, listen. It's a little hard for me to explain to you what I meant about the actors on stage in Hamburg before we set a few things straight. I first need to understand how much or how little you know about the idea of structural racism. And whether you know what Critical Theory is."

"Hm. To be honest, I'm not sure. Frankfurt School? Am I on the right track? But what does that have to do with a musical?"

"Everything," Brigitte answers.

2/ From Frankfurt to Hamburg

"So, I'm sure you've read about what's going on in Florida, with Ron DeSantis cutting off federal funding for anti-racism educational programs and how myriad books have been banned?"

He nods. "I read the other day that even *To Kill A Mockingbird* is among them. That's just crazy. Atticus Finch is the best. However, part of me is not taking that whole thing too seriously. I mean, it could also just be part of an elaborate campaign scheme. Maybe it's De Santis team's way of paving a new Republican agenda that is marking a clear demarcation against Trump? What I don't quite understand is where all that radical critical race theory business is coming from."

"Interesting you should say that, Martin. The thing is: critical race theory *is not radical*." Brigitte emphasises these last three words to send the point home. "It's a social justice theory a bunch of legal scholars expanded from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory you just mentioned. Their objective is to better understand power structures a given society has in order to be able to think how social equality could be achieved."

"Power structures?"

"Yes, it's about exploring the systemicity of inequality. How societal structures support only the needs of those in charge. People with power. It's not a conspiracy myth that demonizes White people and collectively calls them racists, as DeSantis, Trump, and a number of *Fox News* hosts and their ilk have taken to trumpeting to their gullible audiences as a dog whistle."

Martin does not look convinced. "But the typical MAGA supporter is not some high-powered career White guy with a WASP pedigree, a corner office on Wall Street and a summer home in the Hamptons. That's who you mean is powerful, right?"

“True. However, are we agreed that the typical MAGA supporter is White?”

“Sure. That’s pretty obvious. But I also think the typical MAGA supporter is neither rich, nor well educated.”

“Agreed. And that explains one reason that this particular segment of society is so scared of any discourse that challenges established cornerstones of US society. I mean, they have everything to lose if power structures start benefitting Black people, too. They do not want things to change and Trump made it socially acceptable to say that out loud. Think about it, as far back as before the Civil War, even the poorest White person was – at least socially – more powerful than any Black person, free or enslaved. So, if things change to the point in which Whiteness is in itself not an advantage but society becomes more equal, then people really would be advantaged based on merit – regardless of the color of their skin because there would be such a thing as an ‘even playing field’. That would make things a lot tougher. Look, from the conception of the US, racism has always been part of the equation. Even when Jefferson was talking about inalienable rights, he was enslaving so many people who were being forced to work on his ‘plantation’ under duress – these people were enslaved because of the color of their skin. I recently read a book in which someone re coined ‘plantations’ to something I thought is far more accurate – ‘slave labor camps’.”

Martin raises an eyebrow but doesn’t comment, so Brigitte continues:

“But that’s exactly what those places were, and skin color justified the horrors of these places for Black people. Their skin color made them subject to the threat of torture, rape, loss of life or the threat of putting their loved ones in danger if they challenged the system and even established that their children automatically became property.”

“Right, ok. Yes.”

“That means that ever since the descendants of these people have become a part of the social structures with *agency* – and I mean from the time they fought for the right to vote, during Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, #BLM – they have also viewed their history from a slightly different perspective than the descendants of people whose family histories were not impacted by slavery.”

“Makes sense. I get it. But I mean, slavery was abolished, what, 150 years ago. Isn’t it time to move on? Sure, I realize that it’s important not to forget one’s history, lest it happen again. After all, we have the ‘Erinnerungskultur’ discourse in Germany that I find absolutely essential to maintain. But we can’t explain away every disadvantage a German Jewish person has today with the Shoa?”

“Of course not. But imagine if there was no such thing as the ‘Erinnerungskultur,’

which has been allotted the status it absolutely deserves in our culture. Imagine, it was the exact opposite, and state governments like here in Bavaria would start banning books like *Hitlerjunge Salomon* in school because it makes students uncomfortable about their past. Because it forces students of every ethnic, religious, social, and cultural background to engage in a critical discourse about this country's past. That's what is happening in the US when government policies aim to completely eliminate young people's engagement with the history of slavery. It not only silences legitimate historical discourse, which is a scandal and will surely only serve to widen social divides in the future. It also allots the stigma of being unpatriotic to any American who engages in a critical discourse about the history of slavery. And that points to a fully-fledged identity crisis right there."

Brigitte pauses and they both take a sip of their drinks. Martin looks right past her for a moment, obviously lost in thought. Then he frowns and says, "Wait, we were talking about MAGA people... and the Frankfurt School. If I'm not mistaken Adorno, Horkheimer and all them were thinking about structures of dominance in the 1930s in the face of the *European* economic and political calamities of those days? I doubt they were thinking about slavery or racism."

"Well, yes and no. Interestingly, one of the Frankfurt thinkers actually did work closely with an anti-racist activist in the 1960s. Angela Davis studied with Herbert Marcuse in Frankfurt and they remained close friends and colleagues. But what's most relevant for our discussion is the fact that the Frankfurters were investigating the structure of oppressive power dynamics in the widest sense. So, in effect, the nature of privileges and advantages, or disadvantages, for that matter. And the critical race theorists in the 1980s expanded their work to include the parameter of race. And then critical race feminists further expanded it to include gender and race intersectionally for women of Color. In 2020, a smart professor who happens to be a woman of Color then expanded that concept. She considers it important that challenges to the system be *accessible* to people who are affected even, and especially if, they are not academics. She also contends that work in this field needs to incorporate the experiences of people who are actually disadvantaged regarding their race or their gender."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Right, so the term 'intersectionality' was only coined in the 1980s, but of course the fact that every one of us has an intersectional identity has always been the case, even if the Frankfurt scholars did not yet have such a great word to call a spade a spade. I, for instance, am a German cis-gendered heterosexual married mother-of-three woman of Color educated professional. Some of these denominators come with social advantages and some with

disadvantages. Agreed?”

Martin nods and Brigitte can virtually see him forming his own set of adjectives. And then it dawns on him. “So... what you’re saying is that the stereotypical MAGAs we are talking about here, and who we’ve bunched together as a monolithic group for the sake of our discussion, at least those who are not privileged in terms of access to education and money, are at least privileged in terms of their ethnicity.”

“Hm hm,” she says in agreement. “That’s what critical race theory investigates. How pervasive racism is in societal and cultural structures and discourses. The fact that, in order to keep things in a way that benefits dominant society, racial stereotypes are furthered. The fact that the notion of ‘race’ itself is a social construct that supported the exploitative system of slavery and was therefore established as a biological reality, when in fact the color of one’s skin obviously says nothing about the nature of one’s character or morals or ethics. Therefore, as the scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates says, ‘Race is the child of racism, not the father.’”

Martin frowns. This one is hard to process when you hear it for the first time. Brigitte remembers feeling the same way when she first read that quote. She decides to give him a moment.

“You’re saying,” he starts slowly after a moment and then stops again. “Wait. That would mean that the people who benefitted from the slave trade used science” – he air quotes the word ‘science’ – “to explain and justify their exploitation of Black bodies stolen from Africa and their children for centuries. Okay, makes sense and is in line with the ruthlessness of that historical atrocity.”

Brigitte nods. “And the echoes and consequences of such structures are still around everywhere. For instance, I remember as clear as day that I learned in the German School in Nairobi/Kenya, so in the middle of East Africa in the 1980s, that there existed three ‘races’ – the so-called ‘Caucasians, the Negroes, and the Mongoloids,’ or some other twisted version of that racist collective listing. That’s what my German geography textbook said.”

“Mine did too. Right here in Munich. Today, I cringe. At the time, I admit, I didn’t.”

“That’s a perfect example of what CRT calls ‘established explanations’ which it seeks to challenge. Because, I cringed then, too. I remember thinking: *So what does that make me? If there are only three. And my parents belong to ‘different ones’... am I only half of something? What does that make me?*”

Martin looks down when he sees that telling him this is having an emotional impact on Brigitte. She decides that it’s fine to have a reaction like that when remembering a racist encounter of her past. She decides not to shrug it off as she usually does to make this less

uncomfortable for him. She will, instead, continue.

“Martin, let’s bring this conversation back to one of the points that got us here in the first place. I think we do not need to discuss that categorizations such as the ones we learnt in our schooling have served to fossilize cultural racism also in Germany and that at the top of the list, at the top of the racial hierarchy, we find White people. That is true nearly all over the world, as far as I know. Do you agree?”

“I’m sad to say that I do. But I want you to know that I think it’s just so wrong. And even someone like me, who is not racist one bit ... I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Well, I have an inkling. You want to hear it?”

“Your inkling? Hit me.” He smiles promptly.

“Well, for one, you could simply stop saying you do not see that the color of someone’s skin is not White. Because that’s what you are *actually* saying when you say ‘I don’t see color.’ I get that what you mean is that every human is worth the same to you. Fine and agreed. That is just common sense. It merits no applause that you feel that way, and I see no point in saying that out loud to people of Color if you do not go around saying it to White people. Or do you?”

He shakes his head.

“I didn’t think so. The thing is when you say that you don’t see someone’s skin color, you are also saying to a person of Color that you do not acknowledge that their experience of disadvantage is happening to them every single day, whether they like it or not, while you are in the privileged position of being able to remain blissfully unaware of it at all. If you want to. Or, if you want to join in the fight to achieve more social equality, it takes seeing the inequality in the first place. Which is why the Black and Brown people on stage in Hamburg make all the difference.”

He nods and laughs in mild embarrassment. He’s not used to being a mentee. But Brigitte has to say he is taking it quite well.

“I think I need another beer.” He motions to the waiter and turns back to her. “I’m all ears. So, from dolphins to Frankfurt and now to Hamburg. Shoot.”

3/ Via Representation and Colonialism

The waiter places another beer for Martin on the table, a small bowl of Tzatziki, some olives, and Greek bread. Brigitte dig in and Martin takes a sip after he thanks the waiter.

He nods to her reassuringly. “You were saying?”

Brigitte smiles. “Actually, I wasn’t. You were. Let’s see now. Technically, I think this

is going to take us from those dolphins to Hamburg, but we have to take a detour via colonialism and the Super Bowl.”

He raises his eyebrows and gives her a skeptical look. “Can you stop talking in metaphors, Brigitte? I don’t know if I can follow otherwise.”

“Right,” she answers, a little embarrassed. She tends to drift off into allegories and such when she is making a complex point. Not everyone is a fan. Brigitte clears her throat. “In Hamburg, the production is a 100 percent carbon copy of the Broadway show in terms of costume, stage decoration, music, and lighting. The only difference is the language the musical is in. That was something I really could not imagine working. I mean singing about the Founding Fathers in hip hop, R&B, reggaeton, Jamaican dancefloor, swing ... in German?”

Martin nods. “That, I get. I cannot imagine that working either. I don’t even like watching dubbed movies anymore. It’s just wrong to my ears when Tom Hanks speaks in German. And I am nowhere near being a native speaker.”

“Agreed. I remember so intensely that when I went to see the show on Broadway in 2017, the experience of colorbrave casting made me feel seen and represented in a way that I had never experienced in a theater before. It was so striking to me at the time how and why an American story about American Founding *Fathers* in America would deeply impact me on an emotional level, as a German woman of Color. How that made me feel empowered.”

“Really?” He seems taken aback. “Had you never seen a non-White person on a stage before? I cannot, for the life of me, imagine that... don’t you guys go to the theater all the time? I mean...”

“No, yeah. We totally do and did. It was just that I had never been to a play in which the story was centered around White historical characters and the White actor was the cultural ‘Other’ on stage. That was new to me. It shifted something. I’m not sure you can imagine what that feels like.”

“I really cannot.” He shakes his head. “And I still think...”

“Let me try and explain it this way. In your lifetime, as a schoolboy and later as a university student, as a professional person ... have you ever had a teacher, a professor, a colleague who looks like you or like someone you will grow up to look like? A White man?”

“Of course. But ... Oh. I see. You haven’t?”

“Nope. Not ever. I’ve always been the ‘Other.’ And when I saw those actors on stage it felt like in a different way I became part of a universal story. Not as an outsider looking in, but as an insider looking out. And that was empowering. And I wasn’t the only one who felt that.”

“You cannot possibly speak for other people in the audience who are people of Color. Seriously.”

“No, you’re right. I can’t. I’d have to draw up questionnaires and think of a format that would allow any qualitative research I did to be representative. But, I do have my experience in this world. And there is such a thing as a code of behavior among people of Color when they are in the minority in a majority White cultural or social setting. We acknowledge one another. Sometimes it’s a wink. Sometimes it’s a nod. It’s something like an acknowledgment that says, ‘I see that you are having a different experience in this situation than most people here. You are not alone.’ Most times, no words are exchanged. It’s not like a pick-up or anything. It works between all genders and ages. It just is. And in my experience, it’s that way in different countries in Europe, in East Africa (where the minority experience can be being what majority people call ‘point fives’) and for the times I’ve been in the US. And it happened on Broadway in February 2017. Remember, Broadway audiences remain White to a significant majority.”

“Wow. I did not know that.” He pauses, looking slightly taken aback before he continues. “It just seems so radical. Aggressive even. It’s not like everyone who is White is thinking about race all the time and thinking about being part of a majority experience. Not in the US, France, the UK or Germany, for that matter.”

“Of course they aren’t. Why should they? They are always represented in whatever cultural production they go to see. They would have to consciously become aware that not everyone has that experience. And that prerequisites critical analysis of cultural discourses. I’m only saying that of-Color experiences have a kind of in-built discourse regarding representation, or rather not-representation. And when a show like *Hamilton* comes along...”

“Ok, I think I understand where you are coming from now. But we were talking about the German production. So, did it work?”

She remembers the sense of incredulity she felt in November 2022, sitting in that audience on the Reeperbahn. “Honestly, it worked even better for me in German. Although I have heard that they are shutting down the German production in October 2023, I think. I guess not everyone had the same intense connection regarding representation. For me, it was really intense. And I know from other German people of Color who went to see the show in German that they felt the same way.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well, first off, Eliza in the original German cast production is a Black German woman, Ivy Quainoo. I looked her up and her parents are from Ghana, she was born in Germany. And

right off the bat, through only sheer colorbending, she became, to me at least, representative. And it was all the more impressive because it was in this unique space of the most successful Broadway show ever. In a real blockbuster. That made it feel even more like a physical manifestation and validation of what a German woman *can* look like today. That parameters and stereotypes are shifting. This speaks to German identity. The question of how Germans of Color are just as German as the next White German. And the question that German people of Color face nearly every day in Germany, a question that ‘others’ them. It’s a version of, ‘But where are you *really* from?’ That question felt unequivocally answered on stage.”

He lifts his eyebrows. This is obviously not what he expected to hear. “I see. But I mean it’s a musical and it’s the Reeperbahn and it’s just a show. How can you be seeing all that there?”

Brigitte laughs out loud and nods, appreciative of his skepticism. “I guess that’s one way to see it. But, the way I explored the effects of this piece of art is to investigate along which power structures, it shifts established narratives. I couldn’t *unsee* that. Not in the English and not in the German version. How this bends the American myth of the Founding Fathers into a universal story about human survival. Sure, Americans are obviously more conscious of these historical men. The Founding Fathers is not something that is front and center to German identity, after all. Maybe that’s why it feels like, in the German version, the translation becomes more about the collective need of humans to be part of a larger notion about life. Some find it in religion, philosophy, righteousness, war, love in all its forms. In *Hamilton*, it’s one exceptional man’s fight. The odds are against him, he is fallible, and yet he prevails. And for being so human and, at times, self-destructive, the audience rewards him with admiration for being so like them and yet so unlike them. The translation is chockful of elegantly placed nods to German music culture, from Sabrina Setlur to Phanta 4...”

“I had no idea.”

“Actually, yes. Interestingly, not all the actors are native speakers. But their diction is impeccable. And their accents only sent the point home, at least to me, that the German language is a really important marker in the musical scene. We have Broadway in New York, obviously. Then there is the West End in London, the stages in Australia. And of course, Hamburg. Which makes the German audience pretty central to the global conversation about American culture in the musical genre. And from the point of view of an interpreter, I will add that once any script is translated into another language, even if Miranda signed off on every lyric, it takes on a life of its own. And *Hamilton* is no different.”

“How so?”

“The fact that it portrays these historical men is not the focus in the German version. What’s more central is the development of the story among the characters on stage. And it has all the trappings of what just makes a great story – compelling protagonists who are based on real historical characters and in this way feel more real, a sex scandal, a love story, war, defeat, victory; the themes are loyalty, human failure, courage, loss, friendship, perseverance, jealousy, basically the entire range of human emotions and human abysses. And that is irrespective of gender and therefore catapults the women characters into focus so much more than in the American production. Eliza’s voice was front and center of that experience.”

“Interesting.” Martin nods. “And I read last week in a review ... I can’t remember if it was in a newspaper or somewhere on a blog ... that going to see the show is a complete blend of opera and the musical genre.” He looks at Brigitte expectantly, probably thinking she’ll take this train of thought from here.

But Brigitte has no idea what he means. “Really? Tell me more.”

Martin continues after a moment. “Well, I’m not sure if I can remember what it said exactly. But I’ll try. You know how the musical genre is the ideal vessel for transporting very complex and novel ideas. I mean, the audience is totally aware that every single scene expects of them that they set aside reality. The performative experience forces audiences to ignore how locales are only hinted at, characters break out into song and dance spontaneously, lighting and music underline and enhance, costumes seem historical, but the language is modern, that whole juxtaposition. And yet, the transported emotions, the trials and tribulations of the performers’ characters on stage resonate deeply. Audiences cry and laugh collectively. People connect, and on top of that, most successful Broadway musicals are just also great entertainment and therefore do not feel threatening. So, it’s perfect to break down complex social constructions and explain controversial aspects to audiences in an entertaining package.” He pauses with an astonished look on his face. “I think, I’ve just explained to myself how colorbrave representation can be ever so impactful.”

“I think you might have done just that.” Brigitte laughs.

“Aaand ... wait, I wanted to add one more thing. About opera.”

She waits.

“Well, the article said that *Hamilton* audiences on Broadway, now after the show has been running for eight years, the movie and all the hype on social media, to a large part go in knowing the entire show by heart. Many people don’t go to the show without any prior knowledge. Quite the opposite. They are looking – much like in opera – to understand how this show they love will feel on a stage, after they’ve watched the movie and listened to the

soundtrack myriad times. Maybe that's what is different in Hamburg. Maybe that's why they are closing down."

Brigitte raises her eyebrows. "Makes sense. And yes, that is probably not what happens in Hamburg. At least in the show I went to, I would estimate that about half the audience was younger and knew the musical. And the other half was more middle-aged and older and avid theatergoers who did not at all know this piece by heart. In fact, the German lady sitting next to me said that she makes sure to see a show in Hamburg every time she comes into town on business and she had never heard of it. And she was completely mesmerized by the show."

Brigitte takes a sip of wine, lost in thought and remembering that afternoon. Her phone pings. *2 minutes*. "A will be here in 2. B?"

Martin looks down at his phone. "Same." He pauses. "You know, that makes me think of what you said about this Eliza in the German production. Do you think maybe this type of impactful representation will normalize and influence the perception of Germanness of Color in cultural scripts, not only on the Reeperbahn, but in society overall?"

"I'm not sure that a German audience with a completely different historical and cultural background will read it the same way. But I do think there is a transcultural aspect of American studies to be investigated here."

"Once again, I'm not following."

Brigitte ponders out loud. "How can I put this... We were talking about school books, right? Okay, so do you remember any depictions of Black women in your history books who were not enslaved people? I mean in like descriptions and depictions of European history."

He shakes his head. "No, but why would there be? There were hardly any Black people in Europe before World War II."

"True. But the Europeans were in Africa, were they not? And yes, we learn about the slave trade. And we see sketches of the horrific conditions men and women were held and died in bondage. But what we never see are pictures of Black women with agency, powerful women. I was just scanning the description of this new Netflix documentary by Jada Pinkett Smith in which she features all these African queens whose stories are not featured and integrated in European history books. And probably not in many African and American books either, for that matter. I haven't gotten around to watching it yet. But it struck a chord. Even growing up in East Africa, I was never taught about women like Queen Amanerinas of the Kush who defended her country against the Roman Empire. Or Queen Moremi who liberated the Yoruba people in Nigeria, Queen Ranavolana who fought off British and French colonizers of Madagascar, or Yaa Asantewaa, the Ghanaian queen who successfully fought British

colonialism. Cleopatra, the one queen who might be mentioned, is reduced to the sexual prowess she is said to have possessed over Marc Anthony and Caesar. It's never her skill as a political and military strategist that is centered."

"Totally true. I didn't even know women like that existed." Martin shakes his head. "What I did hear some time ago, I think in 2021, was a speech by Chimamanda Adichie. And this kind of loops back to our short excursion on 'Erinnerungskultur.' She spoke at the Humboldt University in Berlin to top German politicians, I think Steinmeier was in the audience, if I'm not mistaken. Her talk was about German school children not learning about their own colonial past, for instance, the Herero massacres, the Galu Galu wars in what was called Deutsch Ostafrika. Of concentration camps in colonialism, of sex slaves ... I think you are right. In the current politic climate, representations like Eliza in the German *Hamilton*, will do their own bit to influence the perception of German people of Color. And, of course, that will impact the current discourse on the legitimacy of extraditing cultural treasures stolen under the guise of colonialism back to their countries of origin. I mean, how contemporary is that."

"Yes. Exactly," Brigitte agrees. "That's one very niche example of how discourses about concepts like critical race theory and intersectional critical race feminism will continue to influence cultural representations. I mean, think about the hype around the 2023 Super Bowl. How Trumpers have taken issue with strong presentations by the artist Rihanna and the fact that Sheryl Lee Ralph sang the so-called Black national anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing" – as far as I know, it wasn't the first time. But it was the first time live on the field. That's strong. And it centered Black History Month. It also scared people."

"That is so true. Wow." Martin shakes his head. "And now that you mention the whole setup of the Super Bowl this year, it puts the hype around the first two Black quarterbacks facing off against each other into a whole different perspective. When I was watching the reporting around this year's game, I felt really irritated about all the buzz at first. But I think I get it now."

"Oh yes, that. What were their names?" Brigitte pick up her phone to Google, as does Martin. He gets a hit first.

"So, their names are Jalen Hurts and Patrick Mahomes. Isn't it just crazy that it takes until 2023 for that to happen? Talk about structural racism. Wait. Hold up. It says here that these two were not actually the first two Black quarterbacks to face off in a title game. Here, look. It's in a *Rolling Stone* article. But that was in the CFL Grey Cup in 1981. Warren Moon was one of the quarterbacks. This guy is super interesting." Martin scrolls down the article and

leans over to allow Brigitte read with him and continues, “Moon talks about how long it’s taken non-White players in the NFL to overcome bigotry and prejudices, but that he was sure this moment would come one day. And look here. The article goes on about how these structures have been coded for so long, and Black athletes have been relegated to other offense and defense positions since the league was desegregated, even those who had played as quarterbacks in other leagues. And that the position of the quarterback was nearly always a White athlete – so the brains of the game remained structurally White. How crazy is that? Apparently, decision-makers in the NFL argued that potential White teammates would not be able to ‘fully trust’ a Black quarterback, using coded racist language about ‘leadership’ and ‘football IQ.’”

“Hard to believe,” Brigitte says shaking her head. “How deep this bigotry is embedded in the cultural code.”

Martin nods. “Absolutely. And it only underlines how calling the entire show ‘woke’ as some conservative pundits and Trumpist legislators in Washington have on Twitter – sorry, X – is just one more way of being anti-Black. So friggin’ racist.”

“But things are moving. And that makes me hopeful. Look, here is Moon’s tweet about it. It says: ‘And for those who don’t think that’s significant, fine. But I’ve been on the journey, so I know what the importance is.’ Talk about the centering experiential knowledge.”

Brigitte looks up to see A and B walk in.

She and Martin smile at each other before they smile at them.

“I think we’ll call it a day for the dolphins.”