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Even if you and your students are unlikely to actually see Lin-Manuel Miranda’s hit Broadway musical *Hamilton* (tickets begin at $300), it is still possible and eminently worthwhile to study history using the show. The music and lyrics (the *Hamilton Original Broadway Cast Recording*) is available in various formats for as little as $11. As Hamilton’s wife Eliza might say, were she alive today, “That would be enough.”

The musical is best known to social studies teachers for its specific content about the American Revolution and the Constitution, and to students for its rap and hip hop beat. (Warning: If you see or listen to the show first, you will not be able to get the songs out of your head as you read Ron Chernow award-winning biography, *Alexander Hamilton.* 

But the musical can also function as a window into historiography and deeper inquiry. The show addresses all sorts of compelling questions for examination in the social studies classroom; here are six for your consideration:

1. **Whose stories get told in the “historical record”?**

Both Chernow’s biography and Miranda’s musical have created enormous popular interest in Hamilton’s life story, but this was not always the case. Hamilton died at a much younger age than the other founding fathers. With the advent of television, an early death might enhance one’s political (or rock star) reputation—it freezes one in the vibrancy of youth—but this was not necessarily so in earlier times. As the character playing Alexander’s sister-in-law, Angelica Schuyler, laments in the musical’s finale:

*Every other founding father’s story gets told. / Every other founding father gets to grow old.*

Equally relevant is who tells your story. If you are not around to tell it, someone else may do it for you. Historian Stephen Knott notes that Jefferson (who survived Hamilton by 22 years) had many opportunities to “portray their differences in a most favorable light without fear of rebuttal.” Favorable to Jefferson, that is.

Parts of the story may not be told at all. In the musical, after Hamilton publishes the story of his infidelity in what came to be known as *The Reynolds Pamphlet*, his wife, Eliza, burns the letters he has sent her over the years on the stage. Her song reminds us of the fragility of the historical record:

*I’m erasing myself from the narrative/*
Let future historians wonder how Eliza/Reacted when you broke her heart.

Lucky for the historical record, the Hamiltons reconciled and, after Alexander’s death, it was Eliza (outliving Alexander by 50 years) who made it her mission to collect and preserve her husband’s papers for posterity. She sings, I interview every soldier who fought by your side/And try to make sense of your thousands of pages of writings.

As noted in “The Hamiltome” (the moniker given to the book by Lin-Manuel Miranda and theater critic Jeremy McCarter), “History looks very different depending on who’s telling it.”

Listen to Eliza’s closing song in the classroom; then invite students to read Bertolt Brecht’s poem, “A Worker Reads History,” which also inquires about who is doing the telling, and who gets remembered:

Young Alexander conquered India./ He alone?/ Caesar beat the Gauls./ Was there not even a cook in his army?... Each page a victory./ At whose expense the victory ball?

2. How do different perspectives change our understanding of events?

In the song, “Helpless,” Alexander Hamilton and Eliza Schuyler sing about their first meeting. It’s followed by the song, “Satisfied,” which reflects on that meeting from a sister’s (Angelica Schuyler’s) perspective. While parts of the two versions are the same, there are also significant differences. Listen to the two songs with students and ask them to list the differences.

This vignette raises the issue of how historians—and citizens, in their daily lives—acquire reliable knowledge when faced with different perspectives and, sometimes, different data and “facts.”

Ask students to write about a memorable event in their lives, then to interview someone else who was present at the same event, and compare the two versions. Students often discover different memories and even different “facts.” How do we try to verify specific facts? Do recalled feelings count as facts? Is there any way to reconcile hotly contested memories of an event?

One of the lovely aspects of the musical is that, in addition to depicting their roles as public figures, it also depicts Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr as fathers. As Hamilton approaches Yorktown, he first thinks of battle and, perhaps, martyrdom, then reminds himself that he has different responsibilities now, with a pregnant wife waiting at home:

If this is the end of me, at least I have a friend with me./ Weapon in my hand, a command, and my men with me./ Then I remember my Eliza’s expecting me... Not only that, Eliza’s expecting./ We gotta go, gotta get the job done/ Gotta start a new nation, gotta meet my son!

Students can discuss how our personal or private “history” might influence the larger public “History” later studied by scholars. In short, there are many different vantage points, or perspectives, from which to examine a historical event.

3. How can we assess the accuracy of a “historically based” work of art?

Miranda has explained his use of poetic license in specific scenes. For example, when the narrative needed a quartet of characters, he introduced Hercules Mulligan and John Laurens in the “My Shot” number, even though Hamilton didn’t meet them until a few years after the events depicted.

There are, however, deeper questions one can ask about truth telling in art. Many professional and amateur historians (including APUSH students) have written on the topic of this musical’s fidelity to the historical record. Below is a list of several critiques, statements about the musical’s possible shortcomings (and links to a source for each). Ask groups of students to each examine one of the critiques, then compare lyrics and dialogue in the musical with passages in Chernow’s biography, Hamilton, (using the book’s excellent index) to assess the validity of that critique. Another source for cross checking is the Gilder Lehman Institute’s free online collection.

Students can share their findings and state whether they would recommend adding lines or changing the action to make the musical more accurate. (I’ve placed the first critique in a chart on p. 294, which could be extended to include the others.)

1. The musical fails to show that Hamilton was an elitist (See details in chart).
2. Hamilton is portrayed as a scrappy immigrant, yet he supported the Alien and Sedition Acts.
3. The musical wrongly implies that America is wholly a meritocracy and the American Dream was and is achievable for all.
4. The musical portrays feminism ahistorically. Although some white American women wrote about politics and society (e.g., Wollstonecraft; Adams; Murray), they were not allowed to be leaders or even speakers in public forums in the 1700s.
5. The strength of Hamilton’s opposition to slavery is inflated in the musical.
6. The crime of slavery is downplayed in dialogue, lyrics, and action. The multicultural cast (in the musical today) falsely portrays people of color as being agents of change in a time and place when they were greatly disempowered.

The musical’s running time is two and a half hours. No issue can be addressed in full. Which issues do students think deserve more consideration in the musical, if any? For example, in the very first song, Jefferson (ironically) provides the era’s context of slavery: “And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted/Away across the waves, he strug-
gled and kept his guard up.” But in the development of the musical, the third Cabinet Battle—on the topic of slavery—was cut, leaving fewer references in the musical to this pervasive stain on American history. Do students think that was a justifiable edit?

4. Why (for what purpose) should we study the “character flaws” of our leaders?
Different characters in the musical sing about the errors that will inevitably be made during the challenging task of governing. Burr sings to his newborn daughter, “I’ll make a million mistakes; and King George asks, Do you know how hard it is to lead? When Washington warns Hamilton, Winning was easy, young man. Governing’s harder, it’s impossible not to think of the late New York Governor Mario Cuomo’s eponym, “You campaign in poetry; you govern in prose.”15

The musical’s creators were concerned that Hamilton’s failures as husband, leader, and father might make him too unsympathetic for an audience today.16 Their narration covers Hamilton’s marital infidelity, political ambition, and indecision. But a sugarcoated hagiography does not make great art or offer great insights for the challenges of our own era. If our students think that Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, Dolores Huerta, or Martin Luther King, Jr., were perfect beings, then they might never feel inspired to emulate them. They might never learn that failure is part of leadership.

5. Is there such a thing as an “indispensable person” in history?
In his biography, Chernow portrays Hamilton as “the supreme double threat among the founding fathers, at once thinker and doer, sparkling theoretician and masterful executive.” Chernow details Hamilton’s volume of writing: Seven years prior to the Constitutional Convention, he wrote a 7,000-word letter anticipating the failures of the Articles of Confederation and proposing a gathering to amend them;17 in the course of crafting the Federalist Papers, he wrote eight essays in a two-month period and, twice, published five essays in a single week;18 and, in 1791, he wrote 15,000 words in a little over a week, using the necessary and proper clause to defend the right to have the Bank of the United States.19 That seems pretty close to indispensable. Miranda calls him a polymath and notes, “The Man is non-stop!” Chernow’s list on page 481 of Hamilton’s achievements is dizzying.20

He writes, “No other founder articulated such a clear and prescient vision of America’s future political, military, and economic strength or crafted such ingenious mechanisms to bind the nation together”21 and concludes, “If Washington was the father of the country and Madison the father of the Constitution, then Alexander Hamilton was surely the father of the American government.”22

Students can explore this issue of indispensability by researching the different founding fathers. In whole-class discussion, students can assess whose contributions appear to be “indispensable.” Can students imagine what might have transpired without each founder’s presence? For example, with Hamilton, would the prodigious work he did have been split among other founders? Which ones? Why or why not could that have happened? Those in power often do try to dispense with reformers and revolutionaries by assassinating or executing them. Can a revolution be squelched if its leaders are eliminated?

6. Which basic issues of a past era are still with us today?
Many of the issues raised in the show arise again and again in U.S. history and, certainly, today. For example, what should be the balance of power between nation and state? (Characters sing, Are we a nation of states? What’s the state of our nation?) What policy should we
have on immigration? (Immigrants / We get the job done.—That lyric yields the biggest applause line in the show.) Will Americans ever deal with our original sin? (We’ll never be free until we end slavery!) What qualities are important in a candidate for president? (I like that Aaron Burr!/ I can’t believe we’re here with him!/ He seems approachable? / Like you could grab a beer with him)?

Who should get to make major governmental decisions—three men in a room, as in New York, or a more democratic configuration? (I/wanna be in the room/where it happens)

These are just a few examples. Choose a current challenge for our nation, and you’ll find it echoing in lines in this musical. For social studies teachers, the musical Hamilton: An American Story is a gift that keeps on giving: “Time to take a shot!”

Notes
1. Lin-Manuel Miranda, Hamilton Original Broadway Cast Recording (2015; NY: Atlantic). [All lyrics are italicized and taken from this recording.]

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Edited by Syd Golston and Peggy Altoff
NCSS Bulletin 112, 118 pp., 2012

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