



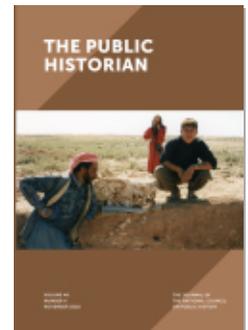
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*Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is
Restaging America's Past* ed. by Renee C. Romano and Claire
Bond Potter (review)

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Book Reviews

Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America's Past edited by Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018. 1 + 386 pp.; introduction, illustrations, notes, appendix, chronology, index; paperbound, \$24.95.

“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?” asks the musical *Hamilton* in the oft-quoted line from its final song. The essays in Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter’s edited collection, *Historians on Hamilton*, examine the question: what kind of story does the musical tell both about Alexander Hamilton and his world and about the world we live in today, and how are these two stories intertwined? To answer these questions, the essays contextualize the musical on two different levels, providing historical background on Alexander Hamilton and his time as well as exploring the origins of the musical itself and the sources of its popularity.

Covering a variety of topics, the essays differ in how central *Hamilton* is to their analysis. Some comment directly on the accuracy of its portrayal of Alexander Hamilton and his historical context, as Joanne Freeman does in her contribution, which discusses how the musical focuses on Hamilton’s personality and character at the expense of the political ideals that drove his actions and policies. Other contributors, however, make less direct reference to *Hamilton*, using it more as a jumping off point for discussing historical topics that go well beyond the scope of the play, as Michael O’Malley does in his treatment of Alexander Hamilton’s understanding of money and banking and the changing representations of Hamilton on US currency.

Of particular interest to public historians will be the essays that examine *Hamilton* itself as a historical artifact and force. In looking at the sources of *Hamilton*’s popularity and the impact of its mixed political messages, these essays address the relationship between history and the public in important ways. William Hogeland, for example, attributes the musical’s misconceptions about Hamilton to the Ron Chernow biography that inspired it, pointing to how the popularity of the biography was part of a broader surge of interest in Hamilton that went back to the 1990s. Alternatively, Elizabeth Wollman shows how, in both its marketing and form, *Hamilton* draws on a long tradition of Broadway musical theater dating back to the 1866 musical *The Black Crook*.

Thus, a common thread running throughout the essays is to question how revolutionary *Hamilton* is in content and approach, despite its own claims to the

contrary. On this point, the controversy over *Hamilton's* treatment of race and slavery takes center stage. In an essay that originally appeared in this journal (vol. 38, no. 1, February 2016) and has already stirred sharp debate, Lyra Monteiro addresses the much-praised decision to cast the musical almost entirely with actors of color. Far from including people of color in the nation's past, she argues that this decision actually effaces both their role and that of slavery in American history. As she notes, except for a brief glimpse of Sally Hemings, no actual historical people of color appear as characters in *Hamilton*. And by overstating Alexander Hamilton's antislavery credentials, the musical minimizes how embroiled the founders were in slavery. Likewise, Patricia Herrera argues that the casting of the show silences the voices of enslaved people and whitewashes the nation's roots in racial exclusion and oppression, while David Waldstreicher and Jeffrey Pasley point to how *Hamilton's* mythic vision of the nation's antislavery founding reaffirms the celebratory patriotism of what has been termed "Founders Chic."

The volume balances the critical bent of these essays with ones that defend the value of the musical. For example, Jim Cullen discusses its usefulness as a teaching tool, highlighting its hybrid character and its ability to bring together different communities. Renee Romano likewise analyzes the musical's appeal to those on opposite sides of the political spectrum, noting its wide acclaim by figures as polarized in their politics as Dick Cheney and Barack Obama. Although acknowledging *Hamilton's* limits on the issue of race, Romano affirms its importance in offering an inclusive American civic myth that can give people of color a sense of belonging in the nation's past without alienating conservative supporters of the traditional narrative of American exceptionalism—an achievement she believes is all the more important as an antidote to the racially exclusionary vision of American origins that has revived with the election of Donald Trump. Joseph Adelman points even more fundamentally to the value of *Hamilton* in raising larger questions about the nature of historical analysis itself. In its emphasis on how much history is a function of who tells it, and its recognition of the limits to historical knowledge, the musical, Adelman argues, conveys the interpretive character of history and its complexity while making a statement about the utility of viewing the past in terms of the present.

Although O'Malley discusses the portrayal of Hamilton on US currency, the collection could have further situated the musical's depiction of him with an essay giving a fuller analysis of his changing image, along the lines of that provided by Stephen Knott in his *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth* (2002). But there is only so much one volume can do. In its focus on a work that has so captured the public imagination, the collection will be of direct relevance and value to public historians. And like its subject, the volume should also appeal to multiple audiences—teachers and students on the college and other levels, scholars concerned with popular memory of the founders, and general readers wishing to learn more about both the musical and the historical world it depicts.

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