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***Hamilton: Lin-Manuel Miranda's
Modern Approach to the American
Dream Based on Equal Opportunity***

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Abstract

From the very beginning, the so-called ethos of the American Dream has summoned the concept of America as the land of opportunities, the perfect scenario to achieve a better future. *Hamilton* (2015) is a musical that has been defined as a show about American history portrayed from a modern perspective. Thus, inspired by that ethos and this musical, my work aims at examining the form in which the theme of the American Dream emerges in the musical with a contemporary approach. For this purpose, a general background is provided, focusing both on Alexander Hamilton himself and on an examination of the impact and development of the American Dream. The American Dream is contextualized detailing how its definition has been subjected to diverse interpretations throughout the years. It is also disclosed how different scholars have reported inequalities surrounding the concept of the American Dream. Taking this data into consideration, an analysis of the musical has been carried out. The findings obtained from the analysis prove that the conventional American Dream is present in the musical, manifesting itself through the character of Hamilton. Nevertheless, it also shows how a renovated and current vision of the dream is reported as well, addressing past mistakes and providing new opportunities for those affected by the prejudices of the American Dream.

Key words: *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda, American Dream, equality, opportunities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Former President Barack Obama described the musical *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) by Lin-Manuel Miranda as a “cultural phenomenon” (1). This is because according to Obama, the musical introduces “debates that shaped our Nation, and (...) are still shaping our Nation” (2), which may resound on people's lives since *Hamilton* is the story of an individual that overcomes his humble origins by achieving a better life (1). *Hamilton*, indeed, is the story of Alexander Hamilton, an immigrant who arrives in the American colonies in pursuit of a brighter future. Additionally, as reported by director Thomas Kail, the musical is “a story about America then, told by America now” (Miranda & McCarter 33). Therefore, the exploration of themes that are current social topics, as immigration or race, among others, is one of the keys to its success, because, eventually, it is the “story of America” (Obama 1).

The musical portrays the life of many generations of Americans, that, as Hamilton, have seen the United States as a land of opportunities for a better future, somewhere to achieve the American Dream. This dream has been in the collective mind of American society from its start. Still, the American Dream has had to be adapted to the current conventions of society due to its first perceptions becoming outdated and unequal for a modern world. Therefore, taking into account that *Hamilton* is said to represent current America, the aim of this work is to examine the form in which the theme of the American Dream emerges in this historical musical with a contemporary approach.

This work reflects how the American Dream is portrayed in *Hamilton* and, in particular, how it gives voice to minorities that have been silenced by the dream itself. In order to do so, firstly, I will contextualize the musical. Then, Alexander Hamilton's biography will be introduced, as a means to help the reader understand the analysis of the American Dream in the musical, since the plot is mainly Hamilton's life, which can be highly associated with the American Dream. After that, I will explore the meaning of the American Dream and its different conceptions. For doing this, diverse scholar visions of the dream will be compared, remarking the complexities of the dream. These contextualizations supply a knowledge that will serve as a foundation to analyze *Hamilton* in terms of the American Dream. First, it will be studied the manner in which Lin-Manuel Miranda introduces the theme of the American Dream through the character of Hamilton. Afterwards, it will be discussed how *Hamilton* portrays some flaws of the American Dream, spotting its inequality from a current perspective in terms of

immigration, as well as gender and race. To complete the analysis of this last subsection, I will focus on Miranda's procedure to support his modern vision of an equal dream for all. Hence, it could be stated that the American Dream that is displayed in *Hamilton* offers an opportunity to explore the development of this national ethos in recent cultural production and in American culture at large.

2. HAMILTON IN CONTEXT

2.1. *Hamilton: An American Musical*

Inspired by Ron Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) –also known as *Hamilton*–, a musical that retells the life of this historical character. In the beginning, Miranda gestated this project not as a musical but as a hip-hop album about Alexander Hamilton, because he believes that Hamilton's life epitomizes hip-hop due to his writing skills (Miranda & McCarter 15). The first public appearance of this project happened on May 12, 2009, in the White House, when he was invited to participate in the program "An Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken word".¹ Miranda described his new work as "a concept album about the life of someone who embodies hip-hop (...) Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton" (15).

The musical made its debut on January 20, 2015, at the Public Theatre of New York City as an off-Broadway show, being highly acclaimed by the critics (Vankin). According to Jason Clark, the combination of the historical but also contemporary themes that the musical introduces contributed to its success. Besides, the writer and literary critic Marilyn Stasio declared for *Vanity* that despite how bizarre the argument may look like – a musical about a Founding Father–, the show captivated the audience's attention from the beginning due to "Miranda's amazing vision of his towering historical subject as an ideological contemporary who reflects the thoughts and speaks the language of a vibrant young generation of immigrant strivers" (Stasio). In July, after having some time to refine and polish the show, the musical moved to Broadway's Richard Rodgers Theatre (Miranda & McCarter 181). These changes, despite being minimal, uplifted the musical even more, making critics changed their depiction of the show from "ground-breaking"

¹"An Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken word" was a cultural event that the Obama Administration host in the White House in order to celebrate American art (Miranda & McCarter 14).

to “historic” (Green). *Hamilton* revolutionized the musical theatre scene and all the nominations and prizes that it gained are proof of that: a Grammy for best theater musical album, 11 Tony Awards –breaking the record of nominations with 16–, the Pulitzer Prize for drama and, in addition, all the weeks included in multiple Billboard’s charts, among other recognitions (Grein).

2.2. Alexander Hamilton

Although the main aim of this work is to seek an exploration of how the American Dream is manifested in *Hamilton*, I find it essential to acknowledge the history of Alexander Hamilton in order to have a background and a context to identify and follow my subsequent analysis. In order to do so, I have followed mainly James Buckley’s biography *DK Life Stories: Alexander Hamilton*, for the purpose of compiling Hamilton’s past by focusing on those personal experiences that can be related to the American Dream. In accordance with Obama’s description, the main character in *Hamilton* was in fact an immigrant in what is now the United States of America (1). And this is, for instance, one of those personal experiences that I reckon as significant and useful for my analysis of the musical.

Alexander Hamilton was born in 1757 in Nevis and lived in St. Croix, islands situated in the West Indies (Buckley 10, 12). Being born out of wedlock, abandoned by his father at an early age, and raised by his mother in a household with little money, led him to be some sort of a social outcast and be considered “illegitimate” (9). Hence, he had to be home-schooled. Notwithstanding, Hamilton achieved a large knowledge, *inter alia*, in history, politics and languages by virtue of his mother and the books that he read, which later will provide him opportunities (9). After his mother’s decease, Hamilton started working for Cruger’s, a business in which he was in charge of accountability and sales. As a consequence of his outstanding management of the money, the adolescent Hamilton was charged with the management of the whole business (17-20).

In 1772, as a result of a destructive hurricane, Hamilton wrote a letter depicting the devastating situation of St. Croix. This letter was published in a newspaper and it astonished readers since “it does seem wondrous that a seventeen-year-old self-educated clerk could write with such verve and gusto. Clearly, Hamilton was highly literate and already had a considerable fund of verbal riches” (Chernow 36-37). The inhabitants of the island, identifying Hamilton’s talent in writing, decided to collect money to fund

Hamilton's education in the American colonies (Buckley 22-23). Hence, thanks to his intelligence, writing skills and resilient attitude, Hamilton was given the opportunity to seek a better future, one of the principles contained in traditional views or understandings of the American Dream, as it will be disclosed in the next point of this work.

In the new land, Hamilton matriculated in King's College (New York City), a place where the major topics were revolution and independence from Great Britain, beliefs that are bounded to the American Dream (Buckley 25-26). Attracted by these revolutionary ideas, Hamilton began writing in support of revolution and giving speeches in favor of a change in government and liberty for the colonies, alleging that "I would die to preserve the law upon a solid foundation; but take away liberty, and the foundation is destroyed" (25-29). Therefore, led by his convictions, when the Revolutionary War started in 1775, he did not hesitate to be part of it. Hamilton began as a captain in the artillery and he was upgraded to colonel (28-30, 40). However, General George Washington wanted him as his personal assistant due to Hamilton's ease with words, which resulted in Hamilton walking away from the battlefield (41). In this stage of Hamilton's life, the value of his innate talent for writing can be spotted, as it allowed him to rank up.

Regarding his personal life, Hamilton married Elizabeth Schuyler, an offspring of a wealthy family, hence from a higher social status (Buckley 43-44). Once the war was finished, Hamilton became a lawyer and got involved in politics, having an essential role in creating the United States of America thanks to his writings and financial knowledge that he had acquired in his early life (51). Once the Constitution was approved and Washington was named first President, Hamilton remained working for him as his cabinet's Secretary of the Treasury (61, 63-64). Despite his success in political life, Hamilton created some enemies (John Adams or Aaron Burr, for instance), due to his politics and his ability with words (84, 87). In 1804, the latest rivalry with Burr ended with a duel in which Hamilton was deadly shot (92-95).

Having outlined Alexander Hamilton's social and professional improvement, the intention of this work is to focus on the fictional representation that *Hamilton* does of this historical character in order to convey a concrete message about the American Dream. With the aim of achieving that, in the musical, Miranda recounts Hamilton's story, but not in a traditional way. Regardless of the value that Miranda gives to historical facts, he distorts reality in some scenarios in order to have the "dramatic coherence" (Miranda & McCarter 33) of the show not affected, a decision supported by the approval of historians

as Ron Chernow –the author of the biography which inspired Miranda– (33). Empowered by artistic liberty, Heather S. Nathans remarks how Miranda “elevates and animates” some historical facts in order to make a statement, since the musical wants to tell “the stories of those whose lives have not been preserved in the archives” (275). According to Buckley, Hamilton was an individual that had to demonstrate his worth steadily since “he never felt like a real “insider” in American politics and society” (91). Moreover, it is also exposed by Nathans that Hamilton has been used as a representation of race and national identity issues on that basis of his intimate feeling of being an outsider (271-272). Therefore, by choosing Hamilton as his main character and playing with him and his expansive historical background, Miranda is representing not only the history of the US but also the story of those Americans who have not been visible or heard in traditional versions of it.

2.3. The American Dream

The term “American dream” was first coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*. Nonetheless, as he explains in that same book, it has been present from the beginning of what is now the United States (Adams viii). For Adams, the American Dream consists of having “a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank” (viii). In accordance with Adams, Blake Hobby adds the idea that the dream is about the opportunity given to every human being of having endless possibilities, regardless of their talents and drives, broadening the dream to opportunities further than just wealth and prestige (25). Moreover, Hobby presents Benjamin Franklin –a contemporary of Hamilton and also a Founding Father (Buckley 54)– as an exemplification and the supplier of the simplest definition of the American Dream: “the rise from rags to riches” (Hobby 23). Since the appearance of this concept, the definition of the American Dream has been evolving. *Ergo*, it has undergone different approaches, though the main idea of opportunity for a better life for everyone has remained unchanged in all the interpretations of the dream. Nevertheless, the theoretical output of the dream has not always been the reality for minorities in America, as it is explained by a variety of diverse academics and scholars.

For Adams, the beginning of the American Dream is found in the first Pilgrims arriving at Plymouth in search of religious freedom (28). Despite the rough conditions of the new land, new settlers continued to come from England to settle in America, due to

the harsh economic, political and religious conditions at home (30, 36). They saw the New World as “a land of refuge and of hope” (30). That hope consisted of having the opportunity of a better life by being able to have different thoughts and beliefs; a place to achieve liberty (31).

Still, Adams’ view of the American Dream is slightly restrictive for a modern outlook. As New England began to extend, population grew, factories became the main job-makers, riches began to arrive, and the small farmers –which “had been the backbone of New England”– started suffering (Adams 157). They, as well as the new immigrants that continue arriving, kept going West where empty land of “surpassing richness which they intended to make their own” (115) was accessible, in order to be able to live the American Dream (157). For Adams, those people were the only ones preserving the American Dream since “It was on frontier after frontier of his vast domain that the American Dream could be prolonged until it became part of the very structure of the American mind” (119). Considering Adams’ understanding of the American Dream as something purely American that could only be realized in the frontier demonstrates that Adams’ ideas are associated with Frederick J. Turner’s concept of the American frontier. Turner believed that the processes of American settlement in the West was the method at hand to move away from European influences since “the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (Turner). Thus, people living in frontiers –mainly farmers in accordance with Adams– were the real Americans who sustain the American Dream.

Due to Adams’ bias regarding who were the actual guardians of the American Dream, in *The Epic of America* he introduces Thomas Jefferson as “the apostle of the American dream” (177), and Alexander Hamilton as the representative of the anti-American Dream (113). Despite both being Founding Fathers, they were opponents in terms of political beliefs. Jefferson reckoned that the American Dream could only be realized in a country where farmers were the dominant core (177). Hence, he supported an agrarian state and opposed the proletarianization of towns and cities (113). Hamilton advocated for a centralized government that could promote industrialism, which would benefit the wealthier classes and speculators but not the rural people (113-114, 134).

In sum, Hamilton’s politics were seen as antagonistic to Jefferson’s ideas on the Declaration of Independence (Adams 113), considered as the beating-heart of Americanism, and therefore also of the American Dream (Adams 135; Hobby 39; Cullen 8; Graham). The Declaration asserts:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (US 1776)

The reason behind Adams’ perception of Hamilton’s politics as opposite to the Declaration was the fact that he thought that Hamilton’s ideals favored the moneyed. Thus, lower classes –farmers in its majority– would be kept out of the American Dream by being unable to pursue happiness or be free from more powerful entities (Adams 134-135). However, Hamilton presumed that a “diversified economy engaged in agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing” (Federici) would support the nation better than Jefferson’s agrarian economy. Federici suggests that, for Hamilton, achieving economic self-sufficiency was the path toward happiness. In fact, Hamilton can be considered as the person responsible for the US financial structure: the industrialism that has provided many opportunities for those who wish to prosper.

From today's perspective, Jefferson’s ideas, and therefore Adams’ view of the dream, seem somewhat limited by that specific historical period and the agrarian society of the time. Consequently, those ideas advocated for a certain kind of people, not for everyone. Moreover, Jefferson defended “that all men are created equal” and that everyone had the right of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” when he himself was a slave owner –as the majority of the Founding Fathers– who never emancipated his slaves (Chernow 212). Hence, they were not equal. Besides, regarding the Declaration of Independence, Lewis E. Kaplan clarifies that Jefferson took inspiration for his writing on the Virginia Bill of Rights written by George Mason, which was at the same time based on the Second Treatise on Government by John Locke. “Life, liberty and property” were the indisputable rights for Locke. Mason added “happiness” to it. Nonetheless, Jefferson decided to exclude “property” (Kaplan 65), narrowing the dream to a spiritual area. On the contrary, Kaplan’s more modern perception of the dream, covers other realizations of it, as the materialistic one. For example, Kaplan explains that a few years prior to the arrival of the Pilgrims, another group of British arrived in Jamestown. Unlike their successors that dreamt with freedom and went to America in order “to escape the discrimination imposed on any dissenting sect by the Church of England”, the first settlers “dreamt of material well-being” and their trip to the other coast of the Atlantic was motivated by the gold and silver that was said to be there (1). Therefore, the right of “property” that Jefferson, and hence Adams, neglected would fit in Kaplan’s materialistic

approach, and the premise of freedom for every individual –that was also inconstant in Jefferson’s approach– in his spiritual category. For Kaplan, both dreams were going to frame the future of the American spirit (1).

Additionally, Jim Cullen states that the American Dream can be divided into different levels since “there is no one American Dream. Instead, there are many American Dreams” (7). His first two American Dreams relate to essential undertones that have already been portrayed in this essay: the one of the Pilgrims and the dream of the Declaration of Independence. Those are followed by the American Dream of upward mobility, which takes the form of social and/or economic improvement, and the dream of equality (8). Then, the dream of home-ownership, as well as the dream of the coast – which consists of “effortless riches” and is materialized in California due to the gold rush and, later on, Hollywood– are displayed (9, 170).² Cullen also presents the topic of immigration, wondering if it is a burden or a blessing for America and remarking that the first European settlers in America were immigrants too. Thus, an American Dream of the immigrant may also exist (188).

Despite the fact that one of the dream’s premises is the one of availability for anyone, US history has shown that this has not been accomplished. For example, Cullen does not know whether he can include immigrants as part of the dream (188). Hence, this subject goes beyond providing a definition to the American Dream, but it is also about how the American Dream has neglected the American people:

Believers in the American Dream assume that America is a land of opportunity where, if one is virtuous and works hard, one will achieve wealth and success. The history of the United States, however, shows that the principles of equality and inalienable rights as set forth in the Declaration of independence and the U.S. constitution did not apply to a good portion of the new World’s inhabitants. For a long time after their promulgation, these founding ideals were not extended to women, African Americans (both during and after slavery), or native Americans. (Hobby 203)

For Cullen, the formulation of the Declaration of Independence is also a clear reflection of the authors’ beliefs. When it is stated that “all men are created equal”, the idea of men

² The gold rush is the massive movement towards California that occurred from 1848 on in search of riches due to the discovery of gold (Cullen 170).

was “not females, not some black- or yellow-skinned “savage,” but civilized white males” (51). White males wrote the Declaration of Independence. As a result, the accessibility of the American Dream was restricted for the minorities since “the Declaration was born and lives as the charter of the American Dream” and the minorities are not part of the Declaration (51, 58).

This inaccessibility of the dream is best spotted in Cullen’s observations on the dream of equality. For him, if there is inequality, the people suffering from it is excluded from the American Dream, even if it is supposed to embody universal eligibility (Cullen 108). For instance, the African-American community has suffered from this discrimination before and after the Civil War. Once free, the government was still controlled by whites who did not have an interest in social equality (115). Women have also experienced a lack of opportunities due to their gender since the dream has been predominantly not just white, but also male (119). This inequality also led to the unfulfillment of other dreams, like the one of home-ownership, since racial prejudices made it difficult for minorities to be able to rent or buy a house (152). Still, these minorities have not given up on the dream, as Martin Luther King manifested in his famous “I Have a Dream”.

It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. (qtd. in Cullen 126)

Currently, in media, the American Dream is sometimes reckoned to be dead. The reason is usually placed on income disparity or severe migration policies (Sauter et al.; Vulliamy). Nonetheless, even if its popularity has diminished, according to different studies, the dream remains and the people more prone to it are in fact minorities (Graham). Carol Graham has analyzed how the optimism on the American Dream has decreased in the last decades due to the recession, affecting a generation that cannot exceed their parent’s income. Or in other words, a generation that is not able to reach upwards mobility. However, poor people are more likely to be optimistic since for them inequality has always been understood as “a sign of future opportunity” (Graham), a vision that today has lessened to only 38%. Hence, Graham assures that the most affected by the “erosion” of the American Dream are the working-class white people whose parents lived the American Dream; and that the ones holding into hope are the minorities,

who have always faced obstacles, by been “more resilient (...) because they still see a chance for moving up the ladder” (Graham).

Therefore, it can be argued that the American Dream has gone through some difficult periods and that it has developed and opened up over time. Adams’ reading of the dream was highly influenced by the Declaration of Independence. However, Jefferson’s agrarian ideals and the significance of the frontier seem outdated aspects for modern society. In the 21st century, in addition to broadening the dream, scholars like Cullen and Hobby have also reported inequalities. However, today, those who have been neglected by the dream remain hopeful, in contrast with white working-classes who have lost faith on it.

Lin-Manuel Miranda can be considered an optimistic person who has not renounced the dream. Being a Latino, he knew that there would not be many opportunities for him in Broadway. Therefore, he created opportunities for himself by writing *In The Heights*, a musical located in his neighborhood, Washington Heights, that depicts the hope and aspirations of Dominican-Americans living there (“Hamilton: One Shot at Broadway” 05:20-06:08). After *In The Heights*, Miranda continued writing. Inspired by the fact that a Founding Father of the US was an immigrant, he wrote *Hamilton*. As Miranda expresses, immigration is part of American history. Newcomers have arrived in America in order to create opportunities for them and their offspring. That is the reason why they are also part of American history and, consequently, of the American Dream (“El compositor Lin-Manuel” 6:57-7:40). In addition, Miranda’s shows are a source of opportunity for those who have been forgotten or silenced by the dream and/or society, displaying “the American Dream he wanted to tell” (“Hamilton: One Shot at Broadway” 13:25-13:42). The musical illustrates that unexplained vision of Cullen’s American Dream in relation to immigration and criticizes those inequalities that Hobby and Cullen already observed. Therefore, I will examine below how *Hamilton* serves as a platform to illustrate how the American Dream has been and should be according to its creator, open to everyone.

3. THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *HAMILTON*

In *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda uses his cultural means to rise a potential conversation on the theme of the American Dream. Even if this ethos has played a part in the nation’s

cultural and political discussion from its very foundation, the application of the American Dream has been biased and discriminatory, going against its own premises. In order to propose this new conversation, the *Hamilton* soundtrack allows the listener to acknowledge, through contemporary sounds like rap, Hamilton's journey "from rags to riches" by being a hard-worker and an ambitious person. Being a sung-through show, there is no need to see the live performance, guaranteeing the opportunity of spreading the musical (and its point of view on the dream) widely beyond Broadway and *Disney+*. The song lyrics do manage to expound the theme of the American Dream and the creators' modern perception of it. However, it is also necessary to address the fact that the live performance gives a further vision on how the American Dream should look like in present US. Consequently, in this section, I analyze Miranda's projection of the American Dream, focusing on the lyrical content of the musical and its execution.³

3.1. Hamilton's Journey to the American Dream

The audience is greeted by the opening number of the musical "Alexander Hamilton", a song that depicts Hamilton's life from his birth to his death. Miranda manages to accelerate the pace of time through condensation, in order to summarize Hamilton's life in just one song. In this manner, from the starting point of the story, the public is aware of the fact that Hamilton is an exemplification of someone who has been able to achieve prosperity by rising from obscurity. The character of Aaron Burr opens the show singing: "How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a / Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, / Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?" (Miranda & McCarter 16). These lines represent the juxtaposition of Hamilton's foreign origins, illegitimacy and poverty in his upbringing, with his professional success. Burr, by inquiring "How", presents to the audience the development of the rounded and dynamic character of Hamilton, and anticipates what he is going to experience in order to achieve the American Dream.

³ The whole soundtrack is available on Spotify under the name *Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*. The live performance has been recently uploaded to *Disney+* streaming platform, making it available for a broader international audience. The official lyrics of the songs are provided in *Hamilton: The revolution*, a book written by the creator of the show Lin-Manuel Miranda and cultural critic Jeremy McCarter. For the purpose of analyzing the lyrical content of the musical, I employ this *libretto* by Miranda and McCarter.

The first step that Hamilton undergoes in order to be able to pursue the dream is to migrate to the Promised Land.⁴ In “Alexander Hamilton”, the character of Aaron Burr exposes the matter that if Hamilton had stayed in the Caribbean, he would have ended “dead or destitute” (Miranda & McCarter 17). Nevertheless, Burr continues explaining how, thanks to his resilience and ambition, Hamilton “Started workin’(...) / Tradin’ sugar cane and rum and all the things he can’t afford / Scammin’ for every book he can get his hands on, / Plannin’ for the future” (17). By reason of his hard-working ethics, intelligence and writing talent, the islanders recollect money to send him to the “mainland”, allowing Hamilton to leave his home in search of a better future (17). In this stage, the company sings in unison “In New York you can be a new man” (17), recalling the idea of the Pilgrims that left their homes in order to escape persecution and build a new life in America, as Hamilton intends in the musical.

One of the bases of all the different versions of the American Dream is the concept of an opportunity for a better life for everyone, as it has been previously mentioned in this work. In this musical, many of the characters are aware of the fact that although America provides opportunities, they have to be taken when they surface, as a line such as “I am not throwing away my shot!” (26) illustrates. This idea is introduced by the *I Want* song of the musical,⁵ which is “My Shot”, alongside the line “Time to take a shot!” (26). “Shot”, one of the many wordplays –a common feature of hip-hop (Bradley 91)– found in this musical, is a homonym that depending on the context it may mean firing a gun, a drink or a chance. Nevertheless, the interpretation of it as chance is the one that has marked Americans as Adams justifies:

The American had always been “taking a chance.” The most serious of the religious leaders of the Pilgrims and Puritans had taken a great chance when they left comfortable Holland and England for the bleak wilderness . . . Every one of the many million migrants . . . who had staked their last bit of money in the world to reach the Land of Promise had taken a tremendous chance, for himself and his family. (Adams 187)

⁴ Promise Land as a reference to the track “My Shot”.

⁵ In the musical theatre jargon, the *I Want* song is an early tune in the play that displays the desires of the main character focalizing the plot of the entire musical. In *Hamilton*, “My Shot” sets the ambition of Hamilton to take every opportunity that he is given in order to succeed in life (Miranda & McCarter 21).

In “My Shot”, “[King George] ain’t ever gonna set his descendants free, so there will be a revolution in this century” (Miranda & McCarter 26) is sung, making the characters realize that their “shot” for a proper American Dream is a war against Britain. By becoming independent, the American colonies would cut ties with Europe, where social classes and conditions were strictly defined (Adams 174). In this way, by becoming more autonomous, they could establish a nation that would be the opposite idea to its colonizer, a land with more opportunities and “open to every man, theoretically at least, to rise from the very bottom to the top” (188), a chance that cannot be wasted.

The leitmotiv “rise up” is introduced for the first time in “My Shot”, as the epitome of “Time to take a shot!” (Miranda & McCarter 27).⁶ The benefit of taking a chance in the Revolutionary War has two realizations and Miranda draws this double entendre with this leitmotiv between “My Shot” and “Right Hand Man”, providing diverse interpretations of the same phrase in different contexts. This leitmotiv evokes two types of Cullen’s realizations of the American Dream: freedom and upward mobility. When Laurence sings in “My Shot”: “Tell your brother that he’s gotta rise up. / Tell your sister that she’s gotta rise up,” and the ensemble joins him to ask “When are these colonies gonna rise up?” (28), the phrase “rise up” appears to be employed as a call for revolting against Britain. By doing so, the American colonies could finally fulfil the wishes of the first Pilgrims who arrived in America by gaining complete freedom from British rulers “claimin’ our promised land” (29). Hence, being able to begin a completely new life. On the other hand, the same phrase is use in “Right Hand Man”, but with a connotation of personal prosperity:

HAMILTON. As a kid in the Caribbean I wished for a war.

I knew that I was poor

I knew it was the only way to—

HAMILTON, BARR, LAURENS, MULLIGAN, LAFAYETTE. Rise up!

HAMILTON. (...) I am either gonna die on the battlefield in glory or—

HAMILTON, BARR, LAURENS, MULLIGAN, LAFAYETTE. Rise up!

(Miranda & McCarter 60)

⁶ Leitmotiv: “a phrase or other feature that is repeated often in a work of art, literature, or music and that tells you something important about it” (“Leitmotiv”).

The incentive of the main character to go to America –as many other immigrants– is to “rise up”. In *Hamilton*, the method of climbing in the social ladder is closely related to military success. Once Hamilton arrives in New York, he realizes that the Revolutionary War is on the verge of breaking. During “Aaron Burr, Sir”, Hamilton repeats: “I wish there was a war! / Then we could prove that we’re worth more than anyone bargained for” (Miranda & McCarter 23). Hamilton’s origins make him eager to prove himself as someone honorable and war is the only chance that he sees to carve out a future for himself. Therefore, he does not hesitate to join the revolution nor has fear of dying, because he knows that the only purpose of landing in the American colonies was to reach a better life achieving upward mobility. The use of “rise up” appears again at the end of the musical in “The World Was Wide Enough”. On this occasion, the leitmotiv is not employed hopefully, but as a phrase that shows Hamilton’s gratitude towards America: “A place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up” (273), a place where opportunities are within reach for everyone.

Indeed, war gives Hamilton’s character the opportunity to prosper. During the war conflict, it can be detected how Hamilton is still willing to risk it all in order to “fly above my station” (Miranda & McCarter 104), meaning to rise up, because, as an immigrant, he does not have any titles or land yet, as he reports to Washington in “Meet me inside” (104). Nevertheless, his good reputation as a soldier and, later on, as Washington’s right-hand, provides him with the opportunity to meet the Schuyler sisters. Angelica –the older of the three sisters⁷– acknowledges in “Satisfied” the fact that they do not belong to the same social status and that, by being with a Schuyler sister, Hamilton could elevate his rank (80-85). And that is exactly what he does when he has the possibility to marry Eliza Schuyler. In “Helpless”, Hamilton explains to Eliza: “I don’t have a dollar to my name, an acre of land, a troop to command, a dollop of fame” (76). Still, in that song, he is able to marry her with the blessing of his father. He is achieving part of the dream: upward mobility.

After the triumph of America in the Revolutionary War, in “Non-Stop” (Miranda & McCarter 137-146), the audience hears about how Hamilton manages to keep climbing to the top of the political spectrum. He becomes a lawyer, then takes part in the

⁷ Miranda’s creative license to modified historical facts is displayed in this point since the Schuyler siblings were more than three (Miranda & McCarter 83).

Constitutional Convention, and finally he is asked to be Secretary of Treasury.⁸ As a reaction to this proposal, Eliza tries to persuade him to step back, alleging that he has already enough. His American Dream was finally realized, since he already had a family, a new home, money and a successful career. However, Hamilton's character knows that opportunities of this kind for people like him do not always occur so "He doesn't throw away his shot" (146) and accepts Washington's offer.

Although Hamilton benefits from the opportunities that America offers him, Miranda portrays the fact that opportunities need to be created. The opportunities' supplier has been his ability to write, as the lyrics in "Hurricane" reiterate. The focus is placed on the power and impact that Hamilton's compositions have had in his own life:

I wrote my way out of hell.
I wrote my way to revolution.
I was louder than the crack in the bell.
I wrote Eliza love letters until she fell.
I wrote about The Constitution and defended it well.
And in the face of ignorance and resistance,
I wrote financial systems into existence.
And when my prayers to God were met with indifference,
I picked up a pen, I wrote my own deliverance. (Miranda & McCarter 232)

Within these lines, Miranda illustrates his vision of strive and effort as indispensable characteristics for pursuing the American Dream, because opportunities are not given for free. Miranda's journey to success shares similarities with Hamilton's because, as there were not enough roles in musical theatre for Latinos, Miranda had to create his opportunity by writing musicals with the aim of acting in them. In the same way, Hamilton secured his success thanks to his writing. Hence, the show shares the idea that liberation is not given by any divine force but it is self-made with hard work.

With the analysis of these lyrics, it has been displayed how *Hamilton* recounts a story of the American Dream from a more traditional perspective. By virtue of the opening "Alexander Hamilton", audiences are introduced to Hamilton's real-life story where it is clearly portrayed that his journey is related to the American Dream. In this

⁸ The Constitutional Conventions was the meeting in which the United States Constitution was written (Buckley 120).

analysis, it has been explored how Miranda through Act I has developed Hamilton's character by exploring his thriving experiences. From his arrival to New York, which resembles that of the Pilgrims, in "Alexander Hamilton" to the last song of Act 1 "Non-Stop," the eagerness of Hamilton and the American colonies to achieve freedom in order to have more opportunities to rise up is perceived. Opportunities that Hamilton does not waste since he becomes Washington's right-hand and he marries Eliza despite having different social status. Moreover, the two songs that have been examined from Act 2, "Hurricane" and "The World Was Wide Enough" depict that, by creating your chances – done through writing in Hamilton's case– anyone can prosper in America, regardless of its background. Miranda by making playful references to history has portrayed this standard vision of the American Dream. Nevertheless, in accordance with scholars such as Cullen and Hobby, Miranda regards the American Dream as a concept that has not been what it promises.

3.2. The Inequalities of the American Dream in *Hamilton*

3.2.1. The American Dream of the Immigrant

Jim Cullen assures that the American Dream has not been fair for many, and a group that has been betrayed by the dream has been that of the immigrants. Besides, he suggests that an American Dream of the immigrant could exist, although he does not include it in his manifestations of the American Dream. Notwithstanding, Miranda represents his vision of this version of the dream in the musical.

Hamilton showcases some issues that immigrants need to address when creating their opportunities to access the American Dream. Being an immigrant, Hamilton's journey towards building his chances has been filled with obstacles –which many immigrants may have confronted in their search for a good life in the US too.⁹ Although hard work is a source of opportunity, the musical implies that immigrants require to strive harder than anyone else. Hamilton, as affirmed in "My Shot", has to attract other people's attention by being louder. His intelligence is not enough: "[he] gotta holler just to be heard" (Miranda & McCarter 26). Additionally, once he begins to gain recognition, he still works beyond what he is asked. "Non-stop" emphasizes this idea of extra effort with

⁹ According to *Harvard Business School*, immigrants are more likely to be entrepreneurs as a result of having difficulties to be hired in existing businesses in the US (Blanding).

the repetition “running out of time” (137-145). The song involves different characters trying to understand why and how Hamilton writes and fights as he is “running out of time”, stressing his incessant activity by repeating this phrase. As an immigrant, Hamilton’s character in the musical is aware that his chances may disappear and that he has to persevere: “[he] writes like [he is] running out of time” (137, 143). Moreover, if it was not for his determination to work more than anyone else, he might have not risen up, as Burr acknowledges: “Alexander Hamilton began to climb” because “the man is non-stop!” (137).

Alongside his success, judgments began to arise, and, in the musical, the unconformity with Hamilton’s ideas is backed by discriminatory comments related to his origins. In Act 2, where Hamilton’s political peak takes place, Hamilton is degraded to a point where other politicians refer to him as just an “immigrant”, with no name.¹⁰ In the song “The Adams Administration”, it is reported how President Adams, after firing Hamilton, “calls him creole bastard” (Miranda & McCarter 224). Similarly, during “We Know”, Burr, Jefferson and Madison, believing that Hamilton is a corrupted politician, sing in unison “Ya best g’wan run back where ya come from” (229). Hamilton fought in the war, helped to create the US and he is now living the American Dream –which is “part of the very structure of the American mind” (Adams 119)–. Still, despite being a Founding Father, it can be detected that Hamilton is still an outsider because he is not recognized as a fellow American by his peers. Miranda, with this conscious and straightforward representation, criticizes the fact that, even if immigrants can accomplish the American Dream, they are not going to be considered equal since total equality is excluded from the American Dream of the immigrant.

3.2.2. The Impartiality of the Dream in the Spotlight

Hamilton’s allegations on the American Dream’s inequality try to rectify the dream’s former flaws by rewriting it with a 21st century approach. Flaws that consisted of disparities between diverse people –not only immigrants–, as Blake Hobby also details when he explains that the dream’s premise of equality only applied for white males (203). Previously exposed, theoretically, the American Dream is supposed to bring equal opportunities to everyone: “‘Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ / We fought for these ideals; we shouldn’t settle for less,” claims Jefferson in the song “Cabinet Battle

¹⁰ This can be spotted in “The Room Where It Happens”, “Washington On Your Side” and “We Know”.

#1” (Miranda & McCarter 161). His belief on these words is such that in “Cabinet Battle #1” (161) and in “Washington On Your Side” (199-201), he criticizes Hamilton for not fulfilling the Declaration of Independence’s principles. Nevertheless, Miranda highlights the fact that Jefferson’s view of liberty was dishonest and limited, and that the Declaration of Independence –and consequently the American Dream– did not include everybody, which the show condemns, as I observe in the following situations.

The less historically accurate moments in *Hamilton* occurred in some of the lyrics disapproving Jefferson’s double morality, which significantly show how Miranda is consciously offering the views that I have mentioned before, since the opposition Jefferson-Hamilton is very symbolic and it epitomizes some of the traces and features that Miranda is reinforcing in his representation of *Hamilton*. This is achieved by introducing current social issues and arguments such as slavery and feminism, what I sanctioned as the modern insight that the show brings forward. An example of this is found in the song “The Schuyler Sisters”:

ANAGELICA. So listen to my declaration:

ELIZA, ANGELICA, PEGGY. “We hold these truths to be self-evident

That all men are created equal”

ANGELICA. And when I meet Thomas Jefferson,

I’m ‘a compel him to include women in the sequel! (Miranda & McCarter 45)

Taking into consideration that the Declaration of Independence was written two centuries ago, the document’s usage of the word “men” can be read as a gender-neutral term instead of only as a masculine marked word. However, Angelica’s character, being conscious of her role within this metafictional scope of the show, suggests that it is necessary to revise the Declaration of Independence because *Hamilton* is “a story about America then, told by America now” (Miranda & McCarter 33), and, today, uttering just “men” instead of “humans” or “men and women” can be considered sexist for excluding females. By delivering this message, Miranda is consciously using feminism in order to raise awareness of women’s omission in the Declaration of Independence.

Regarding liberty, Miranda also shows concern about slavery. Jefferson, at the beginning of Act 2, sings “I can’t / Believe that we are free” (Miranda & McCarter 152), referring to the independence of the colonies. But, in the musical, there are multiple instances where it is repeated that “we are free” does not imply “liberty” to “all men”.

For instance, in “Cabinet Battle #1”, Hamilton reproaches Jefferson that his speech of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is hypocritical since it is “a civics lesson from a slaver” (161), as he is depriving human beings of freedom. Another instance of Miranda reporting inequality through slavery is the multiple remarks done to the fact that black people in the newly born United States had not been considered worthy of the right of liberty that the Declaration of Independence assured. It is described in “My Shot” that black soldiers fought for the liberation of the colonies alongside white soldiers (Miranda & McCarter 27). Nevertheless, they would not have the same rights in the new nation, as it is subtly remarked in “Yorktown” when, after defeating the British, John Laurens states that “Black and white soldiers wonder alike if this really means freedom” and Washington replays: “Not. Yet.” (122).

Although these social issues are tackled from a modern point of view and not from a historical perspective –for instance, in order to make a statement about slavery, Hamilton’s portrayal as an abolitionist is stretched from reality–, Miranda’s intervention in matters like these is executed for the purpose of denouncing the inequality that America has borne from its beginning. Miranda chooses Jefferson with his Declaration of Independence as the antithesis of his vision of the American Dream in order to reinforce the idea of the dream being outdated. In his dream, the equality assured in the Declaration of Independence has to be guaranteed also for women and people of color. Therefore, *Hamilton* recalls the premises of America and the American Dream and criticizes them for not fulfilling what they should have fulfilled. As a consequence of this inequality, the nonexistence of the dream for some, as Cullen also asserts, seemed to be confirmed (108).

3.2.3. Equal Opportunity: Miranda's Remedy Regarding Inequality

As a reply to these discriminatory defects that the American Dream has had all through its historical inception, transformation and perpetuation, Miranda gives opportunities to the people who had been affected by the unfairness of the dream. Hence, the stressed role of immigrants, the employment of a cross-cultural casting, and the usage of rap as the medium of story-telling is not purposeless in *Hamilton*. All these features function as a way to reconcile minorities with a fair version of the American Dream.

To a certain extent, in America, hip-hop culture has become a proper method to share experiences and stories by people who had been alienated, belittled or silenced

(Bradley xiii). In *Hamilton*, the first song states that “America forgot him”¹¹ (Miranda & McCarter 17) referring to Hamilton, and there is this recurrent idea in the musical on the importance of having someone that will tell “your story”.¹² Thus, it is not a coincidence that Hamilton’s ignored story is told through rap music. Moreover, the Bronx was the birthplace of hip-hop and, at the beginning, its artists were highly alienated. These artists, generally young people from poor urban areas with little educational opportunities, were at the heart of rap’s birth (Bradley xiv). This is a reason why one may argue that hip-hop is the perfect scope for a modern or contemporary realization of the American Dream. It has allowed many rappers from humble origins to improve their standard of living by making music. And through that music they have voiced theirs and their communities’ issues, mainly related to poverty, violence, sex or drugs (88-89). Ultimately, hip-hop culture is a great technique to narrate Hamilton’s journey toward the American Dream due to his life resemblance with the hip-hop movement.

As Chernow notices, typically the best-fitted people to perform Miranda’s songs –rap in its majority– would be blacks and Latinos, despite not resembling the Founding Fathers’ whiteness, because the songs are in a genre commonly dominated by these communities (Miranda & McCarter 33). Therefore, Miranda’s choice of using hip-hop – in addition to the similarities that a rapper and Hamilton share due to their ability with words– leads to an association that projects the idea of giving opportunities to performers of color that may have encounter difficulties getting casted. For instance, this was the case of Daveed Diggs –Lafayette and Jefferson in the play– who, before joining *Hamilton*, had already “given up his boyhood Broadway dreams, since the place didn’t seem to have a place for him” (Miranda & McCarter 148). As part of this effort to eliminate inequality of opportunities in the American Dream, *Hamilton* tries to give a chance to every individual by picking a diverse cast with no regard to skin color.

Additionally, Diggs also observes that his resignation of the dream was also driven by the lack of role models. Diggs would have appreciated having another black actor

¹¹ Before the musical, Hamilton was one of the less-known Founding Fathers. For this, he was almost removed from the \$10 bill in 2015. Binyamin Appelbaum suggested in *The New York Times* that Hamilton was the easy choice to remove because historical characters such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln are considered “demigods”, meanwhile “most Americans know next to nothing about Hamilton” (Appelbaum & Barro).

¹² This can be seen in “The Story of Tonight”, “Right Hand Man”, “History Has Its Eyes On You” and “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”.

playing characters as that of George Washington, in order to believe that he also had possibilities to make it (Miranda & McCarter 149). That is the reason why it can be stated that *Hamilton* functions as a showcase of how the American Dream can have a modern approach, that it is alive and available for anyone by virtue of the themes that it discusses and how they are evoked. For example, the importance given in the show to the fact that Hamilton is an immigrant allows many foreigners in America to believe that they will also have opportunities to achieve a better life there. In addition, theater historian Patricia Herrera observes that, due to its cast, “*Hamilton* makes visible the Afro-diasporic significance in American history in the face of a larger society that rarely recognizes it” (Nathans 275). This recognition is important for achieving equality of opportunity. A student from Fort Hamilton High School, after seeing Washington played by a black actor, ensured that it made him feel as he belonged in America (Miranda & McCarter 159), a place where people of color also have the chance to be presidents. Thus, the Obamas introduction of *Hamilton*’s company in the “70th Annual Tony Awards” claimed that *Hamilton* “is a musical about the miracle that it is America”, a country where “we can make it if we try” because it provides opportunities to everyone regardless the person’s background as a result of its inclusiveness (“70th Annual Tony Awards” 0:36-0:58). This is a show about contemporary versions of the American Dream that go alongside contemporary America. It makes no distinction on who can achieve it by portraying inclusiveness and giving hope and equal possibilities to everyone.

4. CONCLUSION

In this work, the concept of the American Dream and its effects in the musical *Hamilton* have been the subject of analysis. The first section has focused on Alexander Hamilton’s life in order to contextualize the subsequent analysis of the musical and its connection with the American Dream. Hamilton’s persona embodies the manifestation of the American Dream, due to the prosperity that he achieved in his life through his writing skills. He was able to escape a dreadful future in the Caribbean and become a Founding Father of the United States. He had the opportunity to achieve “a better, richer, and happier life,” as James T. Adams’ description of the American Dream conveys. Taking as a starting point Adams’ perspective on the dream, I have followed the timeline of the American Dream from the first Pilgrims until today. Many scholars reckon Jefferson’s

Declaration of Independence as the departure point of the dream's convictions, since it states that everyone has the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". Still, despite the concurrence of Adams' premises with Jefferson's ideals, many scholars have disclosed that the execution of the dream has not accomplished what it theoretically or ideally assured, since, throughout the history of the US, many individuals have been excluded from these opportunities and rights.

I have thus proceeded to examine the presentation of the American Dream in *Hamilton*, being the main purpose of this study to analyze Miranda's approach to the dream in the musical. First, the journey of Hamilton towards the American Dream has been recounted by examining some songs' lyrics. It has been reported that Hamilton's experience in the musical contemplates the most traditional features of the dream, as the opportunities that America gives to rise up and reach better living standards. Still, although Hamilton apparently achieves the American Dream, it has also been explored how the musical denounces the dream's unfairness towards minorities. Miranda depicts the strife that immigrants stand in order to obtain opportunities. Additionally, I have discussed how the musical has taken artistic liberties in order to report that the pillars of the dream are not valid in a contemporary world, as it has forgotten people of color or women throughout history. Thus, I have examined Miranda's attempt to deliver an equitable American Dream by giving opportunities and voice to those who have been potentially silenced.

In conclusion, the intention of this work was to provide a deep inspection of the American Dream as portrayed in *Hamilton*. However, I would like to center my concluding remarks in Lin-Manuel Miranda's procedure. He reports the dream's flaws by criticizing it, but also taking action and providing new opportunities for minorities. I find his artistic actions of crucial importance: a source of empowerment for those individuals feeling neglected by the dream. Consequently, a reinforcement of an American Dream that can be indeed for everyone.

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