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Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Sings Which Story?: Narrative Production and Race in the Curriculum of Film Musicals

Abstract

Film musicals serve as a tool to infuse historical and cultural content into social studies curricula towards greater student engagement—for example, Lin Manuel-Miranda's *Hamilton* has become a celebrated classroom piece due to its ability to blend history with hip-hop and pop culture. Yet beyond language and content scans, teachers rarely examine or utilize musicals for how their narratives (mis)represent racial communities. This critical film analysis of three film musicals, using the theoretical framework of history production, reveals themes of historical morality, romantic relationship and race, and implicit/explicit racial messaging. Although troubling in their overall contribution to racial projects, film musicals can in fact be an opportune way to engage in the complexities of teaching race and racism in educational spaces when treated as critical curriculums.

Keywords

social studies; history education; curriculum; film; musicals; race; racism

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Introduction

Theatre and film musicals have long been sources of excitement and entertainment for audiences around the world. For decades, these powerful pieces of creativity have caused generations to sing out loud, dance like nobody is watching, and feel deep ranges of human emotion. These same beloved and compelling musicals, however, are not immune from critique. Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator and one of the stars of *Hamilton*, recently came under scrutiny for the 2021 film adaptation of his 2008 Broadway musical *In the Heights*, due to its lack of Afro-Latinx actors and debated ‘colorism’ (Jacobs, 2021). A flashpoint in theatre and film realms, the racial issues surrounding Miranda and his subsequent Twitter apology are nothing new in musical theatre and ensuing Hollywood adaptations.

Schools, particularly social studies classrooms, serve as spaces that rarely engage in critical discussions of film musicals, but often openly incorporate them into curricula as means to connect with students' interests. In this paper, we examine three film musicals commonly used in social studies classrooms: *South Pacific* (1958), *Hairspray* (2007), and *Hamilton* (2020) (see Table 1). Numerous studies have examined the incorporation of films into social studies curricula as a means of perpetuating false and negative stereotypes of racialized groups to maintain dominant narratives (Bondy & Pennington, 2016; Hawkman & Shear, 2017; Pimentel & Busey, 2018; Stoddard & Marcus, 2006). Yet there is an opportunity to expand this research by adding film musicals into the discussion. This paper analyzes how these three film musicals form narratives in relation to race and through their portrayal of histories when it comes to race and racism. Thematic findings suggest that there is much to be gained in critical understandings of race and racism when film musicals are treated as curricula in history classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from Trouillot’s (1995) theoretical framework of history production. Trouillot (1995) posits that “history is ‘made’” and revealed both from the production of certain narratives that within themselves contain “a particular bundle of silences” (p. 27), and also from the frissoned, uneasy overlay of the academic with the public, or what he calls the “the size, the relevance and the complexity of the overlapping sites where history is produced, notably outside of academia” (p. 19). Thus, the historical narratives taught in schools not only deliberately edit out and silence certain voices and historical renditions while playing others widely and loudly (Brown & Brown, 2010; Loewen, 2007; Wertsch, 2000), but also emerge from the complex process and locations by which public memory and story rubs up against academic historical theory and ‘formally’ recorded history. Omi and Winant (2014) support this understanding of that overlap by pointing out that race is constantly in formation, operating “in the space of intersections, at the crossroads where social structure and experience meet...socially constructed and historically fluid...continuingly being made and remade in everyday life” (p. x). Trouillot further supports that the role public powers play in indelibly shaping renditions of history is enormously underestimated by academia.

This is true concerning film musicals’ cultural power over memory and history itself. American musicals and their film counterparts have not only shaped generations of U.S. citizens’ concepts of history, race, and racism into what Omi and Winant (2014) would call “racial projects,” but also continue to do so in their use as multimodal educational aides in social studies

classrooms (Batt, J. & Joseph, M., 2022; Garrett & Kerr, 2016; King & Woodson, 2017). Trouillot's theory *is* used in this study to analyze film musicals' attention to historical narrative silences concerning race and racism, and also to understand history through the lens of the cultural public entities which formatively shape historical narratives and the way they are remembered and taught. Using these ideas to regard curricula, specifically curricula that like race is always forming and changing, can also actively create space for students to critique *in response* (i.e. student-led edits and revisions to the narrative) when the piece of musical pop culture falls short.

Method of Inquiry

While many scholars have examined the impact films have concerning the reinforcement of dominant racial narratives in social studies teaching (Bondy & Pennington, 2016; Pimentel & Busey, 2018; Stoddard & Marcus, 2006), much of this research excludes film or stage musicals. Furthermore, while many scholars have looked at the ways musicals and even film musicals can be used in social studies teaching, very little of this research attends to race or is theorized via racial projects or history production (Edney, 2017; Dickinson, 2017; Mason, 2017). To expand upon the literature and field, we conducted a media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005) of three film musicals using the analytic design enacted by Stoddard, Marcus, and Hicks' (2014) study of Indigenous representation in film (see Table 2). We deliberately chose three film musicals created in different decades that focused on various points in United States racial history because organizations like GLSEN and The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, as well as websites like teacherspayteachers.com, have created numerous lesson plans using these films. Although the musicals appeared in different forms prior to becoming Hollywood films, our decision to use musicals in video medium stems from extending accessibility to educators, as compared to the physical and financial impediments of attending a stage show with students. Films also open up new avenues for students that might have difficulty reading challenging texts. Coencas (2007) reaffirms this stance by stating, "Students hamstrung by their difficulties with the written word blossom when they become full participants in the milieu of movies. They begin to feel more confident about themselves and their place in the world" (p. 72). Both these considerations and our reading of the musicals' treatment of race are influenced by our positionalities as two cisgender people (one white-identifying woman, one Arab-American-identifying man) who are both former high school history teachers (Banks, 1998). We acknowledge that most musicals in the past and some in the present are made for white patrons and have been/are complicit in sustaining whiteness and white supremacy.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) assert that "content is a function of ideological positions and maintains the status quo. Hegemony is a broad theoretical approach suggesting that media content is influenced by the ideology of those in power in society" (p. 7). Utilizing the work of Shoemaker and Reese, Macnamara (2005) states that media content analysis is used to "study a broad range of 'texts', from transcripts of interviews and discussions in clinical and social research, to the narrative and form of films, TV programs..." (p. 1). Our initial investigation of media content analyses largely involved the research of theatre scholars and their examination of musicals such as *West Side Story*, *The King and I*, and others (Agathayan & Muthuraman, 2019; Harbert, 2018; Pippin, 2000) to expand our own understandings of how they and their field defined and critiqued the racial elements of musicals.

The three chosen film musicals, *South Pacific* (1958), *Hairspray* (2007), and *Hamilton* (2020), were watched individually by each researcher, paying particular attention to racial representation of historically marginalized characters and groups through a Critical Race Theory framework, arriving at comparisons and contrasts, and determining conceptual explanations of the case study (Miles et al., 2020). Together, data was then analyzed again focusing on the codes that emerged through the comparative process. The patterns, themes, and comparisons of the data led us to the findings included in this study. Three main themes emerged from our viewings: the morality of race and history, race and romantic relationships, and the explicit and implicit use of racial narratives.

Data

Morality of History Concerning Race

All three musicals zoom into particular moral dilemmas concerning race, and as they do, eclipse others happening in the same contextual time period that the film narrative portrays. In *Hamilton*, select songs like "Stay Alive" loosely present Alexander Hamilton and particular founding members of the United States as intellectual abolitionists on the "right" side of history. Yet the musical does little to expand upon enslavement and its sustained and supported prevalence during the building of the nation by other Founding Fathers. As Monteiro (2016) notes, "one could easily assume that slavery did not exist in this [*Hamilton*] world, and certainly that it was not an important part of the lives and livelihoods of the men who created the nation" (p. 93). While song lyrics speak to the present with hopeful moral messages, they often do not match the historic Hamilton's actual recorded world (McAllister, 2017). In addition, both *South Pacific* and *Hairspray* have various musical numbers urging for moral acts that will challenge historical wrongs, even as both shows fail to present that history in its complex entirety. For example, the dangerous realities of segregated Baltimore are mainly absent in *Hairspray*'s feel-good protest number and from most city scenes. *South Pacific* paints WWII conflict cleanly—Japanese forces are invisible and stay at an omnipresent distance, and intersections of gender, colonialism, and the power imbalances inherent in each are never named in explorations of who is on which side of the war, and why.

Race and Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships drive a great deal of characters' understandings of themselves and the racial projects surrounding them, both countering dominant narratives and supporting them with complexity (Omi & Winant, 2014). *South Pacific*, in its 1940's WWII setting, is no exception. Joseph Cable, a white military lieutenant, develops a near-fetishized relationship with Liat, an Indigenous Tonkinese native. With a girlfriend back in the United States, Cable ends his romance with Liat because she is Tonkinese. Cable's dismissal of Liat upholds the power and authority of whiteness and fashions Liat into an exoticized plaything cast aside for the moral safety of Cable's character. Even though Cable later decides to push back on what he was "carefully taught" concerning race mixing, and chooses Liat and love, their relationship literally does not survive the story in an act of plot-driven symbolism. Similar themes echo in *Hairspray*'s romantic relationships. In the show's contexts, progressive racial change only

happens due to love and dating. White supremacy in the form of disapproving nuclear families and biased media representation are barriers overridden mostly because of the motivations of teenage love. Organizing, legal work, and boycotts based outside relationality and courtship, and motivated by community-based ethical concerns instead, are not showcased as equally effective or useful measures in fighting racism.

The Explicit and Implicit Use of Racial Narratives

Explicit and implicit uses of racial narratives are prevalent in all three film musicals, with scripting, casting and storytelling techniques varying both the mode and awareness of messages about race. For example, *Hairspray* offers counter-stories to racial narratives but in a comedic, white-washed manner. Tracy Turnblad, the white protagonist, pushes back against the local TV station's racist policies and leads an integration march. In numerous ways, the film presents her as a youthful hero of desegregation, but fails to show the actual violence and sacrifices BIPOC communities experienced during the 1960's. For example, Queen Latifah's Maybelle, the host of the station's "Negro Day," responds to white teens' fear and excitement about being in a Black-owned record store by saying that she and her family have far "more reason to be scared on [their white] street." This line of dialogue serves as one of the few moments that spotlights the feelings of Black characters instead of white, and serves as a contrast to the voyeuristic way Tracy enters non-white spaces, often as a savior. Similarly, *Hamilton* fails to speak explicitly to the tension that lies in its mostly BIPOC actors playing historical figures who were enslavers even as it touts abolition. The message in their storytelling is a visually symbolic narrative that never gets expressly explored or unpacked. *South Pacific* likewise speaks to racism broadly, but focuses on skin color alone, ignoring how the characters' racial dynamics intersect with colonization concerning land ownership, resources, and the natural world.

Results

This critical film musical analysis provides several important implications for educators and educators-in-training who hope to use these secondary sources as pop culture materials, who aim to teach these histories, and who plan to engage in discussions around race and racism in historicized contexts.

Our biggest implication is more of a disclaimer: we want to be clear that yes, we are citing the flaws and complexities surrounding all three film musicals and their varying narratives around race, but no, we are not advocating for their absence from the social studies curriculum. Quite the opposite—our results instead show that film musicals are rife with “racial projects” (Omi & Winant, 2014), thus can be fertile ground for classroom discussion and student analysis concerning the commentaries on race and ethnicity that show up in each musical. We feel these musicals should be used as examples of racial projects for students to both see and then critique. They also can serve as cultural windows to help students begin to understand and then unpack the type of storytelling in the era each film was made to identify how a time period's racial projects manifested. For example, 1961's *West Side Story* cast most of its Puerto Rican characters as white actors in “brown face.” Asking students what they think this decision highlights about elements of 1960's society, and having them compare and contrast that to Miranda's decision to have mostly white historical figures in *Hamilton* played by Black and Brown actors via hip hop, is a powerful exercise in identifying, understanding and talking back

to racial projects in history. There are clearly so many pedagogical possibilities in using these musicals in the classroom. But they also should be used because they are already speaking so loudly to the secular world and the messages students are picking up in their lives, whether they are examining them or not. To have these films and their pop-culture heft dissected and scrutinized in schools in the context of social studies teaching makes students drivers of critical historical inquiry (Salinas & Blevins, 2014) with a story and medium that they already carry a great deal of cultural memory on (Assmann, 2011). The very popularity of these film musicals is a major reason for teachers to take up these pieces and bring them contextually and critically into the classroom. It is a way to capitalize on them as something students have heard of, can find on social media, and perhaps even deeply care about. The question, as it ever does in teaching critically, is not *if* educators should use film musicals in critical social studies teaching, but *how*.

As they do, one of the most important considerations to keep in mind that we found from our study is that no *one* narrative suffices when teaching complex counter-storytelling of any event and/or people in history. For its time, *South Pacific*'s soundtrack was not only the highest selling album in the 1940s, but also received critical acclaim—and controversy—for its confrontation of racism, especially in interracial relationships (Norris, 2014). However, this analysis shows that while there is such value in sharing carefully historically contextualized messages of the musical with students, there is also an overwhelming need to problematize the show's oft-colonized and racist delivery of this antiracist message (and how it has aged). The same is true for *Hamilton* and *Hairspray*—even as these shows deliver powerful counter-stories concerning race, whiteness is pervasive in both the intended audience and greater structure of the shows. *Hamilton* may tout the titular Founding Father's dedication to abolition, but it also perhaps exaggerates it while the very Black and Brown actors who play his enslaver contemporaries dance with Sally Hemings and never name the system that dominates the deep irony of their casting. *Hairspray* may cleverly confront the ugly truths of racist hatred and discrimination in the 1960s without sugarcoating, but it also does so via a story that centers a white woman and her saviorism.

As history teachers, we know that moments when something that you are teaching overlaps with something students are excited about already is a golden opportunity, and one that rarely knocks twice. As McNish (2016) claims, "Young students often complain that history is boring because it is taught as only facts and dates, but adding song could change the game and make history more exciting" (p. 151). Once again, without the chance to deeply engage with these stories, musicals such as *South Pacific*, *Hairspray* and *Hamilton* will speak loudly for themselves, and students will hear these messages without a deeper discussion around what they mean in relation to race, power, and dominant narratives. These are the very complexities that students deserve the chance to lean into, analyze, and even rewrite by engaging with historical "secondary sources" and interjecting the richness and complications of their own positionalities and experience.

Significance

Harbert (2018) posits that when we examine musicals from a critical perspective, one sees they are never just about history, "they are also vehicles for cultural commentary relevant to the present day. Like most popular representations of the past, they often reflect present-day ideologies more than they attempt to open an objective window onto an irretrievable past" (p. 414). They are racial projects set to song and dance, cultural messages intertwined with

entertainment. Students deserve a chance to unbraided both sides of the story in history class, the entertainment and cultural relevance both.

So what could this look like? The possibilities of critically examining change over time from multiple perspectives using film musicals in the classroom are myriad. For example, a lesson plan that “fact-checks” the major historical events of these film musicals with primary source history, surrounding perhaps Japanese *and* American accounts of fighting in the South Pacific up against James A. Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific* that the musical was based on, could be a deep dive into perspective-taking, voice and accuracy in history-making. Consider too what handing students the metaphorical pen for lyrical rewrites of some of *Hairspray*’s hits would mean in terms of them researching more historical facts about 1960’s Baltimore and its segregation, or featuring other reasons to fight discrimination besides romantic interest in someone. Or entertain asking students to apply the [Bechdel test](#) to a viewing of *Hamilton* to answer if it can be classified as feminist, sexist, or somewhere in between, and what that means both for the 20-teens of its creation, and the 1700’s that it depicts.

Another way to explore gender and intersectionality could be found in analyzing how gender can complicate one’s conception of the American dream, as sung about in *West Side Story*’s “America” in [this lesson plan](#). This is a generative start. But to garner even more student engagement and depth, think along the lines of examining the differences in each film musical adaptation of the song (comparing Spielberg’s 2021 “[America](#)” to Wise and Robbins’ [1961 adaptation](#)), and then asking students to deliberate why 2021’s shows more active protests, different community spaces and yet still kept many scene and choreography details the same (including non-subtitled Spanish scenes and lyrics, and more historically accurate Puerto Rican flag colors). Also asking them to notice any differences they might see in who the characters are (for instance, Spielberg’s Anita is played by Afro-Latina, queer actress, performer and Academy-Award winner Ariana DeBose, whose presence represents historic casting changes and serves to personify a power of intersectionality somewhat lacking in the original version) can lead to fruitful, complex discussions around counter-storytelling, and how the history that we “see” is constantly changing over time depending on where racial projects are situated in the present, and how the current moment ‘produces’ history on and off screen.

Particularly at a time when critical counter-storytelling is under attack for exposing students to antiracist ways of understanding the world and themselves, scholars and teachers must use the popularity of film musicals such as *Hamilton*, and many others, as an opportunity to problematize any one story speaking for an event and/or group; as a way to scaffold student knowledge of race in all its critical complexity; and as a way to give students power to analyze and potentially rewrite historically unjust or racially limiting/damaging histories. Also, we must ask ourselves, what would teacher preparation look like if preservice teachers were encouraged to increase awareness of racial projects as they show up in the cultural arts, and then build socially-just teaching for racial literacy and equity around these materials and cultural moments?

History does not happen to us. Rather, we write it. Armed with antiracist understandings of historiography, critical analyses and edits to film musicals’ songs and story can be ways for students to put themselves “back in the narrative” of the history they are learning and making (Miranda, 2015). Popular film musicals are a powerful, widespread, and accessible curricular resource for young people to understand historical narratives and representations in all of their racial complexity (Otten et al., 2004).). If educators are to help prepare young people in their re-imagining and re-building of a more equitable society, then we must expand what we consider to

be effective, socially-just curriculums and put those more expansive mediums to work in the classroom.

Tables

Table 1: Film Musicals Selected for Analysis

Film Musical & Director	Year Released	Film's Focus
<i>South Pacific</i> , Joshua Logan	1958	World War II (1943) and the relationships between U.S. servicemen/women and one South Pacific island chain's inhabitants/residents
<i>Hairspray</i> , Adam Shankman	2007	1962 Baltimore and the challenges of integration in the city, school and local TV music and dance show
<i>Hamilton</i> , Thomas Kail	2020	The American War for Independence and founding of the United States as related to the life and influence of Alexander Hamilton

Table 2: Film Musicals, Narratives Produced, and Racial Representations

Film Musical	Narratives Produced	Racial Representations
<i>South Pacific</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The American servicemen protect the Indigenous Tonkinese from the savagery of the Japanese, but also use their power to harass and degrade Tonkinese women for enjoyment - Americans, a civilized people, are taught racism by societal structures that play on the fear of the "other" - Western colonialism is never addressed directly, but the picturesque island landscape serves as a destination where one should desire to live 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - White men and women as saviors, but morally conflicted individuals - Indigenous Tonkinese as illiterate, backward, or hypersexualized - A sexual or othering fetishization of Tonkinese women by white men - Justification of white racism towards Tonkinese as taught or embedded at an early age - Only one Black character in the entire movie (backup chorus)
<i>Hairspray</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear-cut divisions between white individuals that wanted integration to occur and those that fought against it - Integration was swift and succeeded because of the strong-willed and loving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - White saviors to stop other racist whites - Black individuals as "cool and hip," but also troublemakers - No representation of Indigenous,

	white people that wanted it to happen - Black communities are dangerous places for white people unless you know where to go or who to hang out with	Asian, Latinx, Arab, etc. communities - Intermixing of races taboo and frowned upon by 'society'
<i>Hamilton</i>	- Alexander Hamilton was a complex individual that believed in what was "best" for the United States and fought valiantly for it - The fledgling nation survived because of the great actions of the Founding Fathers and the sacrifices they made for its prosperity - Hamilton's impact on the history of the United States would be long forgotten if it was not for Eliza Hamilton preserving and continuing his work	- BIPOC actors/actresses playing Founding Fathers and other white historical figures - Lack of discussion or presentation of Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, Arab, etc. communities' experiences - Black historical figures as sidebars/lyrics (Sally Hemings) or disregarded (Cato) - Vague mentions of enslavement (perpetuation or abolishment)

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