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JEFFREY SEVERS

University of British Columbia

‘Is it like a beat without a melody?’: Rap and revolution in *Hamilton*

ABSTRACT

Hamilton (2015) celebrates rap as the discursively dense, incandescent language of American revolution, democracy and individuality, but the musical also, in its tragic course, portrays rap’s limits, especially when post-revolutionary problems of governance and family life arise. In giving these dual fates to the show’s central musical language, creator Lin-Manuel Miranda draws on the history of hip hop in general and gangsta rap in particular, offering an implicit critique of vengeful violence through allusions to the allegedly linked murders of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. In its close readings of lyrics, this essay focuses on Alexander and Philip Hamilton and John Laurens and draws connections between these characters’ development and Miranda’s use of abolitionist and revolutionary history. The essay also explores the show’s many allegorical attempts to link positions on the political spectrum with different styles of music, from pop and jazz to the increasingly intricate rhyme schemes of hip hop.

KEYWORDS

hip hop
gangsta rap
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Revolutionary War
contemporary music
race

Hamilton has become synonymous in the popular mind with rap, its major lyrical form, and among many other celebrity fans, hip-hop royalty have embraced the work, as evidenced by, among other things, the appearance of Busta Rhymes, Nas, Chance the Rapper and other luminaries on the

Roots-produced *Hamilton Mixtape*. I argue in this essay, though, that while *Hamilton* celebrates rap as the language of America, revolution and individuality, the musical also, in its tragic course, narrates rap's excess, failure and necessary tempering. Rap, in creator Lin-Manuel Miranda's vision, is a democratic, incandescent language that those devoted to a new nation must learn in order to make political progress, but rap, in its reliance on rhetorical aggression and its embodiment of impulsiveness, also proves inadequate to the nuanced challenges of post-revolutionary life. Learning the American language of rap is tied to many contingencies and dangers, especially when the goal becomes governance of the nation and selfhood that rap's energy has secured. For these reasons the show that has become famous as the hip-hop musical ultimately has its masterful rapping hero depart from hip hop, especially when its inherent bravado meets with episodes of untamed personal violence. *Hamilton* and associates must in effect learn the power of rap – and then learn to give it up.

Focusing largely on the twinned fates of revolutionary John Laurens and young 'poet' Philip Hamilton, in this essay I study rap's valorization and dissolution as Miranda's narrative works through the portentous question about the consequences of political violence at the musical's start: 'Or will the blood we shed begin an endless / Cycle of vengeance and death with no defendants?' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 29). The answer to this question lies in Hamilton's theme of managing the rhetorical rashness that is necessary to the revolutionary forging of representative democracy but destructive to its careful cultivation. 'I'd rather be divisive than indecisive', Hamilton tells Burr in one of the show's many illuminating rhymes; the musical as a whole shows the importance of sometimes being a bit of both (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 49).

Hamilton's subtle critique of rap's aggression, I argue, is also tied to a second, much more contemporary layer of the show's meaning: the history of hip-hop culture, especially its gangsta subgenre and that music's own 'cycle of vengeance'. Miranda, born in 1980, became obsessed with the music as a teen in the mid-1990s, and the earth-shattering events of this period of hip-hop history are the possibly linked drive-by murders of two gangsta rap superstars quoted and played with in *Hamilton*, Tupac Shakur (in September 1996) and Notorious B.I.G., a.k.a. Biggie Smalls (in March 1997). Biggie's murder is widely seen as revenge for Tupac's, the by-product of in-song dissing between the two rappers and of east coast-west coast rivalries between their respective labels and affiliates. Shakur's tendency to be 'extremely undiplomatic, publicly calling out rappers he hated', was a quality that Miranda linked to Hamilton early in the show's composition (Mead 2015). I of course attempt no resolution of these still unsolved murder cases or further conspiracy theories here; rather, I invoke these deaths by gunfire as a key piece in understanding how rap, violence and vengeance intersect with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history of political passions and impatience in *Hamilton*. Explaining his immediate recognition of hip-hop culture in the Ron Chernow biography of Hamilton that inspired the composition, Miranda has said that Hamilton 'caught beef with every other founding father', using the hip-hop term for disputes like the one between Tupac and Biggie (Gross 2017). I demonstrate that the dynamics of 'beef' are one aspect of *Hamilton's* quest for digestible illustrations of the revolutionary spirit that drove Hamilton and the duelling culture that determined his end. Moreover, in telling a historical figure's history of intellectual development through rap, from the successes of his youth to his tragic death, *Hamilton* must, in a sense, also trace the

genre's own development in pastiche form, including a central echoing of the moments when the representational disrespect and violence of the gangsta mode famously became part of real life. On the level of form and metaphor, I show that, in the show's closing moments, this self-conscious encounter with (and overcoming of) gangsta imagery culminates in *Hamilton's* identification of rap's beat-driven form with death itself.

The massive success of *Hamilton* with people from across the political spectrum (as Galella points out [2015], in addition to the many liberal celebrity fans the show has been touted by Rupert Murdoch and Lynne Cheney) is in part testament to how much hip hop has exploded in popularity, diversified and, in the hands of Miranda and similar artists, evolved away from 1990's associations with gang violence and cop-killing and the (primarily) right-wing cultural hysteria that greeted NWA, Ice-T, and songs like 'Fuck tha Police' and 'Cop Killer'. But these gangsta figurations are still deeply important to interpreting the various ways of being productively aggressive in Miranda's onstage world. At the same time, I hardly seek to participate in the literalism and simplistic theories of mimesis that have long determined the reception by conservative critics of rap's focus on violence. Rather, following scholarly readers of hip hop, I here regard the gun-wielding gangsta identity as simply one aspect of the multiform dramatic personae that rap MCs tend to create. Gangsta narratives boasting of violence, whether against rival gangs or police, should not be taken 'straight'. 'As an audience we have yet to condition ourselves to understand rap's tall tales as acts of projection', Adam Bradley writes in an analysis of hip hop's literary sophistication. 'Rap's relation to reality is like an inside joke that much of the listening public doesn't get. The joke lies in the MC's winking assertion of the "truth" of obvious fictions' (Bradley 2009: 163–64). Such an approach meshes with the winking nature of *Hamilton's* own playful construction of history, what Ariel Nereson calls 'the critical interplay between history and historiography that runs throughout the performance' (Nereson 2016: 1046), as when Hamilton and Burr comment on how history books will tell their story (or have told it). *Hamilton* evokes and quotes rappers on violence in a similar mode, as characters who are themselves engaging with fictionality, self-criticism and artful despair even as they draw on gritty autobiography. As Oliver Wang (2013) writes, '[N]o American pop genre celebrates the power of the gun as much as hip hop. What critics forget is that no pop genre confronts or contends with the consequences of gun violence as much as hip hop either'.

Thinking through *Hamilton's* complex uses of hip-hop history and some of its major African American stars also adds some unexplored complexities to the show's much-discussed racial politics. The main commentary on racial identity in *Hamilton* has concerned its daring casting of non-white actors to play the founding fathers and the ironies of presenting the slave-holding Jefferson and Washington as black men; but that describes only a few relatively superficial dimensions of the show's ideas about race, slavery and immigration in the early and contemporary republic. Some exceptional voices have found *Hamilton* not nearly so progressive as its applause lines about immigrants getting the job done, its calling-out of Mike Pence and its intertwining with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton would suggest. Galella, for instance, sees aspects of the show's belief in the mythology of the American Dream that are ripe for conservative, neo-liberal and racist exploitation: *Hamilton* 'tells a top-down narrative that celebrates hard work and an innate ability to achieve success', an 'approach that obscures indigenous and enslaved people who

did not triumph as Hamilton did' and ignores 'very real, material obstacles' in the path to prosperity (Galella 2015). In perhaps the most extreme critique of *Hamilton* yet, Paul Street deems the musical's egalitarian political message a gross misreading of Hamilton's historical elitism and finance-centred principles, suggesting that Obama's embrace of the show is representative of the victory of neo-liberalism under cover of multicultural progress. 'Miranda's *Hamilton* is in this sense a perfect cultural wrap up to the ugly neo-liberal Obama years', Street writes. 'It is a brilliant ahistorical monument to Orwellian, fake-progressive bourgeois identity politics in service to the very predominantly Caucasian financial elite and ruling class hegemony' (Street 2016). As I suggest in the close readings that follow, in looking only to the most salient features of *Hamilton's* racial story and embrace of the American Dream, critiques like these miss at least some of the conflicted and unresolved stances roiling beneath the surface. I explore some of these powerful conflicts through the show's textured relationship to varied legacies of hip hop, particularly at points where eighteenth-century slavery politics, the show's non-white casting of white founding fathers and the fitfully improvised creation of rappers' personae all converge.

At its core, *Hamilton* takes its celebration of the immigrant's American Dream (familiar territory for Miranda from *In the Heights*) and filters it through links to rappers' narratives. As Nereson writes, the musical from its opening number portrays Hamilton 'as saved from a life of poverty and insignificance largely by his skill with words', and 'bolstered by the music, it is easy to hear the connections between Hamilton's back story and popular narratives of social mobility through rapping' (Nereson 2016: 1046). In making this connection, Miranda (as his notes confirm) refers to some great moments of hip-hop self-assertion, such as Tupac's 'Holla if ya hear me' in Hamilton's 'I gotta holler just to be heard', or the verbatim quoting of 'Only nineteen but my mind is older' from Mobb Deep's 'Shook Ones Part II' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 26, 26n1, 26n2). From its title to its complex rhyme schemes, 'My Shot' also echoes what has become the great popular statement of the need to embrace fleeting 'opportunity', Eminem's 'Lose Yourself'. More specific resonances with contemporary rappers occur in *Hamilton's* repeated references to the 1772 St. Croix hurricane that led the teenage Alexander to write a poem that brought him his first fame and support for his education – or as 'Alexander Hamilton' puts it, 'Put a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brain, / And he wrote his first refrain, a testament to his pain' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 16). Miranda, commenting on Hamilton's transcendence of circumstances through writing, notes connections to 'Jay-Z, Eminem, Biggie. Lil Wayne [a native of New Orleans] writing about Katrina!' (Binelli 2016). In another context, he uses more blunt terms: 'Hamilton literally wrote a verse to get him off an island – that's the most hip-hop shit ever. He transcends the struggle' by writing about it in poetry (Beggs 2015).

Yet *Hamilton*, in depicting its title figure's verbal genius and drive, also explores foils who have yet to learn rap or who miss its impact (both musical and political) entirely. Miranda uses subtle allegories to situate characters along a timeline of musical/political history, with hip hop and a newborn democracy as the twin points of telos. King George exists outside American musical idioms, invoking the sounds of the so-called 'British Invasion' in his Beatles-inspired 'You'll Be Back'. As the one character the play calls for casting as white, King George brings together, in one figure, oblivious whiteness, political oppression and resistance to musical diversity and innovation

(Herrera 2017: 29). Appearing directly after King George in 'Right Hand Man', George Washington must of course be an excellent rapper, dexterously narrating the Continentals' early losses with many stacked rhymes. Another future president, Thomas Jefferson, away in France until the 1789 opening of Act 2, arrives singing in a smooth jazz style that, while missing King George's goofy singsong quality, is just *too* smooth, compared with the jaggedness of rap. Suffused with a clichéd nostalgia ('Virginia, my home sweet home'), Jefferson's singing seems tied to the historical figure's acceptance of slavery, on display in the accompanying dancing (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 152). Paralleling Hamilton's lightning-speed development between 'Alexander Hamilton' (where he does not yet rap) and 'My Shot', Jefferson soon 'learns' the improvisatory force of hip hop, making a worthy opponent for Hamilton in 'Cabinet Battle #1'.

Aaron Burr, noted for his reticence and willingness to wait, draws on a precursor of rap, dance hall, and largely refuses urging from the central foursome to 'Give us a verse, drop some knowledge!' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 25). Burr raps often and extensively in his narration but, in the diegetic action, cuts himself short; notice too that, in the sinuous rapping of 'Washington on Your Side', Jefferson (who will out-manoeuvre Burr politically in the election of 1800) does all the extended riffing while Burr only joins in for single-line responses and choruses. Burr's adherence to an older musical form seems to exemplify his political outsiderhood, best encapsulated in the dance hall 'The Room Where It Happens'. Eliza Hamilton, a chastening influence on her husband throughout, notably never raps (rapping is left to her sister Angelica, who in 'Satisfied' expresses an impulse for transgression that is deeply appealing to Alexander).

These large-scale musical allegories with the most prominent figures have a potent reflection on the micro-level of 'My Shot'. Hamilton's three revolutionary comrades in Act 1 – Laurens, Lafayette and Mulligan – appear in the bar scene preceding this song as embodiments of 'early' rap, both in terms of their individual talent level and the history of the form. Laurens begins, 'I'm John Laurens in the place to be', and continues with simple, end-rhymed lines with no variation ('be', 'three', 'me', 'free'), reminiscent of an early rap hit like Kurtis Blow's 'The Breaks' in 1980 (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 25). Lafayette and Mulligan add some in-line rhymes (such as Lafayette's 'afar' and 'bonsoir') but remain stuck on simple themes of braggadocio and vulgar masculinity that evoke the longest-standing rap tropes: Lafayette is 'the best', while the hyper-sexed Mulligan uses the adolescent taunt of 'ya mother' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 25). Lafayette's nascent English skills in 'My Shot', dramatically improved by the time of the warp-speed 'Guns and Ships', suggest what is going on for the entire trio: their rapping needs a formal revolution too. As Miranda explains in an interview, Laurens and the others start out, like early 1980's rappers, 'rhyming at the end of the line [...] And then here comes Hamilton. And suddenly you're getting a lot of internal assonance and a lot of internal rhyming', as Hamilton formally demonstrates 'his intellect and ambition' (Gross 2017). As the three learners answer Hamilton's example with their later verses in 'My Shot', Laurens goes from calling the British 'cops' he will simply shoot to a big-picture understanding of abolitionism and revolution as programmes that must be aligned; Lafayette (while he comically has trouble pronouncing it) uses not only a multi-syllable rhyming word with 'anarchy' but a complex concept of political philosophy; Mulligan brings in class mobility as motivation to rebel, identifying the revolution as his 'chance / To socially advance' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 27).

As ‘My Shot’ comes to a climax, intricate multi-syllabic rhymes underscore the yoking of rap skill to political ideals and rhetoric. For instance, when Hamilton rhymes, ‘A bunch of revolutionary manumission abolitionists? / Give me a position, show me where the ammunition is!’ the moment both verbally dazzles and holds the rebels to the high standard of making black and white freedom the objectives of their violent work, extending Laurens’ ideals (and marking a huge leap ahead of his initial ‘I will pop chick-a pop these cops till I’m free’) (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 27, 25). Articulating American political discourse, *Hamilton* continually implies, requires the drive and verbal density of rap. As Miranda has said, rap is ‘uniquely suited to tell Hamilton’s story’ because ‘it has more words per measure than any other musical genre. It has rhythm and it has density. And if Hamilton had anything in his writings it was this density’ (Rose 2015). In the show, Hamilton’s condensation of complex policy decisions into catchy lines and vivid images repeatedly wins the day for a time, as when he declaims on ‘a new line of credit, a financial diuretic’ in ‘Cabinet Battle #1’ and, in ‘#2’, depicts a beheaded King Louis XVI saying ‘Uh ... do whatever you want, I’m super dead’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 161, 192). In both cases, his position wins out.

By the time these moments of successful rap-rhetoric occur in Act 2, though, *Hamilton* has introduced other crucial arenas in which rapping, whether a fully developed talent or not, leads towards peril and tragic ends. In fact, in Act 2, after the military battles are won, rap proves a largely inadequate language for the mature challenges Hamilton faces, summarized in Washington’s pithy formulations: ‘Dying is easy, young man. Living is harder’ and ‘Winning was easy, young man. Governing’s harder’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 64, 163). To get at the stakes of this development for rap, violence and racial identity, let me focus in particular on the dual (or duel) arcs of John Laurens and Philip Hamilton. One actor plays both roles, heightening a juxtaposition of Act 1 and Act 2 duel scenes that foreshadow Alexander’s ultimate fate. In Act 1, the colonials endure in-fighting when Washington appoints Charles Lee as his second-in-command, as chronicled in ‘Stay Alive’. The following song, ‘Ten Duel Commandments’, is *Hamilton*’s most extensive and intricate hip-hop homage, echoing in title and counting structure Notorious B.I.G.’s ‘Ten Crack Commandments’, a set of rules for drug dealers. Laurens wins this duel, shooting Lee in the side, but news of his death in South Carolina will reach Hamilton by letter near the end of Act 1 in ‘Tomorrow There’ll Be More of Us’ (a non-musical scene, left out of the cast recording). In ‘Ten Duel Commandments’, the reference is not really to Biggie’s drug-dealing; rather, his ultimate fate – murdered in 1997 in a possible act of vengeance for the killing of Tupac – comes to shadow the formalized practice of revenge and resolution in eighteenth-century duelling. In annotations of his lyrics on Rap Genius, Miranda explains his use of ‘Ten Duel Commandments’ as an attempt to illuminate the ‘codified [...] ritual’ and order of duelling: ‘It was like legal arbitration [...] with guns [...] “Ten Crack Commandments” is a how-to guide for illegal activity in the 90s. And this is a how-to guide for illegal activities in the 1790s’ (Miranda 2015a).

But as with so many other anachronistic nods in the show, from immigration and ‘big government’ issues to the connections between Hamilton’s debt plan and the 2008 financial crisis, the historical is also interpreting the contemporary here: the 1790s are being used to illuminate the 1990s and after. In this context, Laurens becomes a vexed and somewhat awkwardly constructed amalgamation, occupying an intriguing nexus of concerns in race,

rap, violence and various forms of historical licence. As with all the revolutionary figures, Miranda's casting notice for Laurens calls for a 'non-white' actor (Herrera 2017), and Laurens/Philip has been played in the Broadway production by Puerto Rican-born Anthony Ramos and African American Jordan Fisher. As Brian Herrera argues in anatomizing the controversy surrounding *Hamilton's* casting calls for non-white actors and their perceived possible illegality, Miranda's casting call 'strategically flips the script of those casting conventions that purport neutrality while actually privileging variations of whiteness as most neutral, versatile, or universal' (Herrera 2017: 30).

In Laurens' particular case, though, we must add to these challenges to the power of whiteness the role played by eighteenth-century anti-slavery politics for the white historical figures being portrayed. Throughout Laurens' career in the narrative Miranda emphasizes the man's abolitionist activism, which contributes to the show's egalitarian themes and brings out, in contrast to Washington and Jefferson, a progressivism in the story of Hamilton. Laurens' fighting and his writing with Hamilton on slavery add bulk to the latter's smack-down of Jefferson on southern slavery in 'Cabinet Battle #1'. Contrary to Street's critique of 'Miranda's distortion' of Hamilton's record on race and equality (Street 2016) and Galella's claim that the show 'exaggerates the significance of abolitionism in the American Revolution' (Galella 2015), Chernow – not only Miranda's major source but a consultant to the production – writes that Alexander, never forgetting the brutalities of the slave trade in St. Croix, 'expressed an unwavering belief in the genetic equality of blacks and whites [...] that was enlightened for his day' (Chernow 2004: 210). Discounting claims that Hamilton himself bought slaves (these were, rather, paid black servants) and attending to his attitudes towards the Schuyler family's slave ownership, Chernow continues, 'Few, if any, other founding fathers opposed slavery more consistently or toiled harder to eradicate it than Hamilton – a fact that belies the historical stereotype that he cared only for the rich and privileged' (Chernow 2004: 211–12).

But portraying Alexander as an anti-racist crusader as often as *Hamilton* does may indeed be a convenient exaggeration, and in the proportion of actions an audience sees unfold onstage, Laurens' noble relationship to the racial ideology and genocidal violence of his day seems somewhat overshadowed by associations with the personae and battles of gangsta rap – associations that seem to be not entirely under Miranda's authorial control. After the strong assertion regarding 'those in bondage' in 'My Shot', Laurens' abolitionist fighting in South Carolina receives brief mentions in 'Stay Alive', 'Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)', and the moment of his death, but no onstage scenes. And in 'Ten Duel Commandments' he mainly becomes a vehicle for setting up the tragic trajectory of duelling in Act 2 (as I explain in greater detail below). Laurens' early line, 'And I will pop chicka-pop these cops till I'm free', connects him with Tupac, who in 'Soldier Like Me' raps, 'I'm poppin' at corrupt cops / Them motherfuckers catch a hot one' (Shakur 2004). Laurens' connections to Biggie and Tupac become part of *Hamilton's* muted lament of the killings that ended the careers of two of hip hop's greatest performers and added to the genre's reputation for intense glorification of violence (scepticism of which *Hamilton* reinforces by turning from a celebration of revolutionaries' bayonets in Act 1 to the tragedy that attends duelling pistols in Act 2). Jeremy McCarter, writing alongside Miranda's annotations in *Hamilton: The Revolution*, calls Smalls the 'predecessor who gets sampled the most in *Hamilton*' and a man whose 'enormous

shadow [...] proved useful too, as his story [including his death] helps to collapse the distance between the revolutionary era and our own time' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 95). Again, I would emphasize that, far from just being a tool performing this 'helpful' role, Biggie (and much more of the gangsta genre) imports into *Hamilton* troubling issues of the politics of rap and revenge.

In broader historical terms, the post-revolutionary 'cycle of vengeance' that 'My Shot' warns against transpires in national politics only in limited, manageable terms as Hamilton, Jefferson, Washington and Burr hash out the new nation's policies and rap-battle without real violence (until the end). There was, indeed, no second American war as the eighteenth century ended and the new republic found its footing, something the revolutionaries of 1776 could not have foreseen with any certainty – and something that would turn out very differently for the French after 1789. Chernow is again Miranda's likely source on the musical's worry about recriminations and vengeance. In his biography, examining a 1775 event in which Hamilton saved a Tory opponent from an angry revolutionary mob, Chernow writes that the moment 'presaged a recurring theme of [Hamilton's] career: the superiority of forgiveness over revolutionary vengeance' (Chernow 2004: 64). Hamilton was 'a committed revolutionary with a profound dread that popular sentiment would boil over into dangerous excess' and even 'mob rule' (Chernow 2004: 64–65). Yet, these complexities of channelling revolutionary fervour and denying impulses cannot make their way onto Miranda's stage; the obligation of *Hamilton* to reduce complex history to sung narration ends up making the violent cycles of gangsta rap a relatively important means of assessing the theme of vengeance, not just a way of enlivening a distant historical conflict.

The show's association of rapping with violence and death becomes clearer and stronger when Laurens is transformed in Act 2 and the actor playing him returns as not just a hip-hop neophyte but a literal child. Philip Hamilton enters as a nine-year-old desiring to imitate his father's advanced rapping: in 'Take a Break', echoing Laurens in 'Aaron Burr, Sir', Philip the fledgling rapper sings haltingly to his father, 'My name is Philip. / I am a poet. / I wrote this poem just to show it. / And I just turned nine. / You can write rhymes but you can't write mine' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 169). Nine is a deeply symbolic age here; when the number appears earlier in 'Take a Break', as Philip learns French from his mother by counting at the piano, a sour note is struck on 'nine', and nine will return as the all-important moment before the tenth pace in a duel (when the dueller decides whether to fire on his opponent or throw away his shot). By counting to nine Philip also mimics the Chuck D sample at the beginning of 'Ten Crack Commandments', again bonding Laurens/Philip with that song and milieu. Counting, a key skill for the rapper's building of beats, bars and compelling flow, has dark undercurrents throughout *Hamilton*, not just in the duel scenes: consider Eliza describing herself as 'down for the count' in 'Helpless', when she first meets and falls in love with Philip's future father (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 71). In 'Blow Us All Away', once he has grown to teenage, Philip follows Laurens in duelling, challenging George Eacker (a Burr supporter) when he dishonours Alexander in an 1801 speech. Philip acts on the advice of his father, throws away his shot and dies when Eacker fires early. The fact that one adult actor plays Philip at nine and nineteen reinforces the audience's sense that, in spite of bravado, Philip is highly vulnerable, initiated into an order he cannot handle; adding to this sense is his

callback to his childhood rapping as he prepares for the duel: ‘My name is Philip / I am a poet / And I’m a little nervous, but I can’t show it’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 246). His rhyming retains a beginner’s simplicity throughout ‘Blow Us All Away’, a marker, in Miranda’s vocabulary, that he is unprepared to defend himself rhetorically or physically.

The willingness to confront death is another ubiquitous motif of hip hop, especially gangsta rap, and let me conclude my close readings by attending to Alexander’s coupling of rap’s formal features and his constant courting of death. Biggie’s debut album in 1994, to cite just one example of this trope, is named *Ready to Die*. Hamilton picks up on this motif early on, in ‘My Shot’:

I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory
 When’s it gonna get me?
 In my sleep? Seven feet ahead of me?
 If I see it comin’ do I run or do I let it be?
 Is it like a beat without a melody?
 See, I never thought I’d live past twenty
 Where I come from some get half as many.
 Ask anybody why we livin’ fast and we
 Laugh, reach for a flask,
 We have to make this moment last, that’s plenty.
 (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 28)

Miranda calls this verse ‘the Rosetta Stone of Hamilton’s brain’ and says it took him ‘the better part of a year to write’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 28n12). Part of the Rosetta Stone, I would suggest, lies in the meta-musical translation of ‘Is it like a beat without a melody?’ The ‘it’ being directly discussed here is death, but the line also offers a succinct definition of rap. ‘Divorced from most considerations of melody and harmony, rap lyrics are liberated to live their lives as pure expressions of poetic and musical rhythm’, Bradley explains. ‘Even when rap employs rich melodies and harmonies [...] rhythm [in Hamilton’s terms, a beat] remains the central element of sound’ (Bradley 2009: xv–xvi). Without a beat (or without the beat-boxing Miranda often asks hosts to perform when he is asked to freestyle on talk shows), there can be no rap.

Miranda returns to the Rosetta Stone verse twice more, multiplying its meanings: first, in ‘Yorktown’, when death is overcome and the revolutionary spirit of Act 1 is at its moment of greatest triumph. Notably, the ‘beat without a melody’ line is not repeated there. But it does appear, reworked, when death does arrive for Hamilton, in his duel with Burr. Hamilton’s killer recapitulates the counting of ‘Ten Duel Commandments’ with a listing of ‘ten things you need to know’, but the bravado that marked the Biggie-inspired earlier number is now displaced by Burr’s fears and doubts and (on the cast recording) Leslie Odom Jr’s cracking voice (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 272; Miranda 2015b). With the bullet fired, the orchestra is silent: Hamilton’s words are accompanied by no music, only desolate whispers of wind (Miranda 2015b).

I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory.
 Is this is [*sic*] where it gets me, on my feet, several feet ahead of me?
 I see it coming, do I run or fire my gun or let it be?
 There is no beat, no melody.
 (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 273)

If rap's beat was identified with danger and death when Hamilton was a headstrong youth, now, with death looming and a bullet (represented by a dancer) coming towards him, even the beat has dissolved and abandoned him – something shown in both the semantic content and the halting rhythm, the poor flow, of these lines. Throughout *Hamilton*, the regularity of hip hop's beat-driven structure has provided a suitably urgent order for Hamilton's and others' intricate thinking, yet here the form has totally collapsed. The hip-hop beat sustained revolutionary actions, but the beat's collapse suggests that it was only ever a contingently reliable structure, not something around which to build a whole life.

The lines later in Hamilton's final speech make ironic, despairing variations on earlier bits in the performance (for example, 'I'm running out of time'; 'Wise up. Eyes up'; 'Teach me how to say goodbye'), and his form becomes repetitive and chaotic as no verses cohere and five straight lines end with 'the other side' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 273). But perhaps all music, not just hip hop, abandons Hamilton in this eleven o'clock number, and many meta-musical meanings become available: for instance, the orchestra's silence reinforces the suggestion that the audience of this show must now carry forward Hamilton's 'legacy', for later lines say, 'I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me. / America, you great unfinished symphony' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 273). The image echoes Walt Whitman's famous claim that 'The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem' (Whitman 1996: 741). In *Hamilton*, the American poem has required a beat – but also the awareness to avoid letting that beat determine and make precipitous every action.

'Just you wait', Alexander sings in *Hamilton*'s opening number about the 'million things' he will accomplish (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 16). He is insisting that others wait for him, but the story shows that he would do well to take his own advice and balance his beautiful fervour with some Burr-like deliberateness. Amid many more obvious references to the history of musical theatre (such as *South Pacific*'s 'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught', *The Pirates of Penzance*'s 'I am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General' and 1776's 'Sit Down, John'), one that I have not seen noted is to the *My Fair Lady* number titled 'Just You Wait'. The connections between Hamilton and Eliza Doolittle are not obvious but are, upon close inspection, also not superficial: like *My Fair Lady*, *Hamilton* is also a story of learning to speak well through singing, or, more precisely, learning to discourse thoughtfully but aggressively through rapping – a hip-hop turn on the Pygmalion myth that Miranda focuses through the lens of American class mobility, immigrant striving and revolutionary fervour. In *Hamilton*, speaking like a true American means not getting vowels and consonants 'right' but finding the brash words and surprising rhymes that improvise a unique identity on the spot, meanwhile also embodying founding ideas about freedom and the symbolic and actual violence that attempts to secure it.

Rap itself essentially grows up onstage in *Hamilton*, passing through a pastiche of phases as its practitioners, applying the art form to their development of democracy, learn to deploy, tame and reflect on the music's revolutionary fire. Miranda, explaining Washington's insight into the difference between winning the war and governing the nation, cites Mario Cuomo's famous assertion, 'You campaign in poetry. You govern in prose' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 163n8). In the *Hamilton* I have described here, you revolutionize America in rap, but you govern your life and passions by other means.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jeffrey Severs is associate professor of English at the University of British Columbia. He authored *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (Columbia, 2017) and co-edited *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* (Delaware, 2011). He has also written articles on John Edgar Wideman, Suzan-Lori Parks and Barack Obama and published in, among other journals, *Critique*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *MELUS* and the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*.

Contact: Department of English, University of British Columbia, 397-1873 East Mall, Vancouver BC V6T 1Z1, Canada.

E-mail: jeffsevers@gmail.com

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