



Universidad de Oviedo

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

**Trabajo Fin de Grado
Grado en Estudios Ingleses**

Reimagining Representation: Exploring the Impact
of Colour-Blind and Identity-Conscious Casting in
Hamilton (2015) and *POSE* (2018-2021)

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Julio de 2024

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Introduction: Overview and representation statistics in the United States.

The issue of the lack of representation of people of colour and non-normative identities in the entertainment industry has been a growing topic of discussion for the last couple of decades. In the 19th century, actors in blackface performed in minstrel shows, and in the 20th and early 2000s it was a common practice to cast cisgender men to play transgender women. In order to solve these issues and favouring a more inclusive representation, creatives in the USA started to use methods like colour-blind and identity-conscious casting. As this essay will show, we have definitely come a long way, but there is much more work to do still.

Racial equality has been sanctioned by law, with its most important landmark being the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended racial segregation in public spaces, public education and federally assisted programs. Even though the entertainment industry is something secondary in people's lives, it is important for people to see themselves and their identity represented in the media they consume. It is also important to represent minorities in honest ways – there have been many examples in the past of minorities being portrayed in ridiculing, sidelining, or criminalizing manners, which helps in the creation of stereotypes that make real people's lives very difficult. A prime example of this is the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, which has been cited as one of the factors for the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan: there was a “sharp spike in lynchings and race riots coinciding with its arrival [...] Road show counties continue to experience higher rates of hate crimes and hate groups a century later” (Ang 2020, 1). Honest representation is necessary for all types of identities, including sexual orientation and gender identity – LGBTQIA people have a higher risk of being marginalized by the communities they grew up in, and good representation in the media can help to eradicate the prejudices that lead to this marginalization.

In order to contribute to a wider fight against racism and discrimination, colour-blind, colour-conscious, and identity-conscious casting have become some of the methods chosen by creatives to portray more diversity in their casts.

Colour-blind casting aims to deliberately disregard an actor's race or ethnicity when he or she is being chosen to play a role. In most cases, this means that the production will not delve deeply into the impact of race and ethnicity in the dynamics within characters or within the world created for the story. There are some notable examples of this type of casting in recent years, such as TV series *House of the Dragon* (a prequel to *Game of Thrones*), or Indian-British actor Dev Patel portraying Sir Gawain in *The Green Knight* (Woltmann 2023). Colour-blind casting falls under the umbrella term of non-traditional casting, as actors of any race or ethnicity could play characters where this part of their identity is not relevant to their character or story, whereas in mainstream casting these roles would automatically go to white actors. According to Alan Eisenberg: "Unless otherwise specified by character description, these roles tend to be 'white-understood' and cast accordingly. Subsequent productions often replicate the original casting, thus limiting further access for minorities." (Eisenberg 1988). This means that whenever the race or ethnicity of a character does not have an impact on the storyline (when it does have an impact, it is a tragic for the most part), the character will most likely be played by a white actor.

This method of casting has been commonly used for adaptations (book or comic book to screen or stage). An early notable example of this is Eartha Kitt, a black woman, cast as Catwoman in the third season of *Batman* (1967) which had been played by a white actress beforehand – after this, both white and black actresses would go on to play Catwoman in different media: Michelle Pfeiffer in *Batman Returns* (1992) and Anne Hathaway in Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and Hale Berry in *Catwoman* (2004) and Zoë Kravitz in *The Batman* (2022). This method has become quite common in Shakespeare productions at least since 1955 when Joseph Papp started casting actors of colour for his productions – black British actress Pippa Bennett-Warner was cast as Cordelia in a 2010 production of *King Lear*, and Denzel Washington and Corey Hawkins played Macbeth and Macduff respectively in the 2021 film adaptation *The Tragedy of Macbeth*.

Colour-conscious casting takes representation a step further and acknowledges the issues of race and ethnicity within the production. To truly understand the difference between these two methods, colour-blind casting needs spectators to suspend their

disbelief to the point of imagining a world where race does not matter, while colour-conscious casting sheds light on the impact race has on the world of the story. Sometimes, productions blur the line between these two methods, which is the case for the world of Netflix’s *Bridgerton*, which acknowledges race at some points but does not delve deeply into the consequences in the story. In the first season of the show, the audience gets to discover a seemingly alternate history in which Queen Charlotte (wife to George III) is black, and it is explained later in *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* that this union is the reason why some of Britain’s Dukes and other noble people are people of colour, as the King’s mother (Princess Augusta) grants titles to some people of colour upon realizing that her son’s future wife is black: “With one party,” George tells Charlotte, “we have created more change, stepped forward more than Britain has in the last century” (Rose 2023). This method of colour-conscious casting can come in the shape of different casting and production decisions: choosing to look for actors of a specific ethnic background, using the topic of race to give new meaning to the storyline, or changing details about the production to show how race impacts the lives of the characters (Frazer-Carroll 2020). Identity-conscious casting tries to widen the objectives of colour-conscious casting to represent non-normative identities in media. This means taking into account gender identity when casting transgender characters or disabilities when casting disabled characters, for example (Woltmann 2023).

The University of California, Los Angeles researches and publishes a report concerning diversity in Hollywood (both in film and television) every year. This report covers everything from lead actors to directors and writers, does an in-depth analysis of white vs minority representation, and compares it with the proportionate representation in the US population. The 2023 television report covers the 2021-2022 television season scripted shows in broadcast, cable, and digital mediums. When it comes to show creators in all three of these categories, both women and people of colour remained underrepresented – the percentages of minority show creators

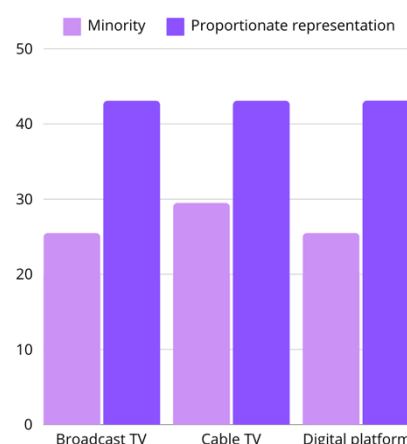
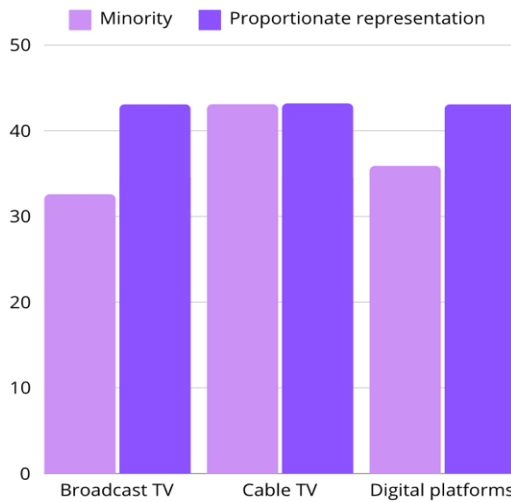


Figure 1. Percentage of minority show creators across different mediums compared to their proportionate representation in the U.S. population.

ranging between 23.2% and 29.5% (proportionate representation being 43.1%). When it comes to lead actors, people of colour have advanced in their representation mainly among cable TV channel leads, although they remained underrepresented in broadcast and digital television. When taking into account individual racial/ethnic groups under



the minority umbrella, only black actors reached proportionate representation across all platforms. The percentages of minority representation ranged between 35.9% and 43.2%. (Ramón, Tran, and Hunt 2023, 16-37).

Figure 2. Percentage of minority lead actors across different mediums compared to their proportionate representation in the U.S. population.

Representation on the Broadway stage is less researched than in Hollywood. The Asian American Performers Action Coalition released “The Visibility Report: Racial Representation on NYC Stages” in 2021, which showed that 58.6% of all roles in Broadway and off-Broadway productions went to white actors during the 2018-2019 season. The minority percentages were broken down into different racial/ethnic groups: 29% were black actors, 6.3% were Asian American, 4.8% were Latinx, 1.3 were MENA (Middle Eastern and North African), 18% were BIPOC actors who identified as mixed race, and none were Indigenous (Pun and Kim 2021, 12).

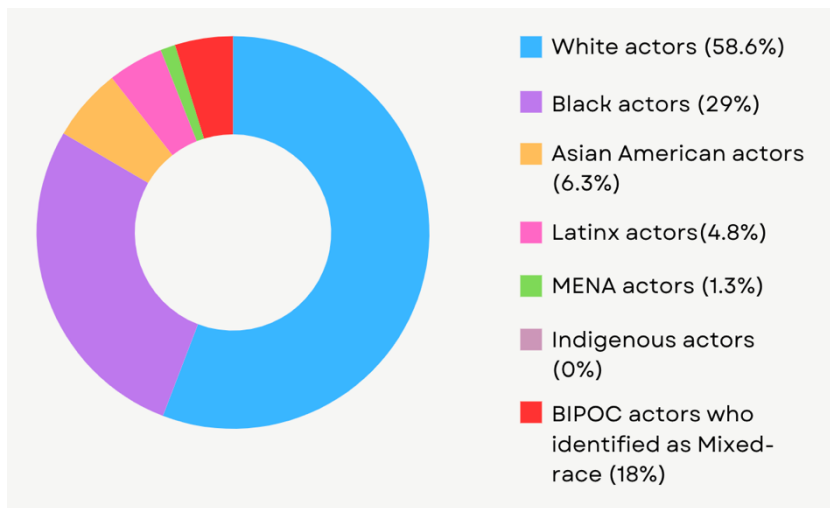


Figure 3. Percentages of roles given to actors of different ethnicities in the 2018-2019 season on Broadway.

This essay aims to contribute to a better understanding of these practices (alternative casting methods) by analysing the phenomenon in two different media: Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*, a Broadway musical that tells the story of founding father Alexander Hamilton in hip-hop and rhythm-and-blues songs, with an ensemble cast made up of BIPOC actors; and Ryan Murphy’s *POSE*, set in 1980s New York City’s ballroom culture, a scene that was populated by queer people, mainly black and Latino, and whose cast reflects this, having an ensemble cast including a number of BIPOC transgender and queer actors. Along with this analysis, we will also have a closer look at the history of the representation of marginalised groups in the media, the cultural context in which the analysed productions have taken place and describe the different methods of casting in greater detail, with the objective of deciding which of them could work better in the future in order to achieve better, proportionate representation.

For the purpose of clarity, the term “trans” (shorthand for “transgender”) will be used in this essay. This word refers to people who do not align in their gender identity with the gender they were assigned at birth. The word “transexual” will be used in direct quotes of older literature if necessary, taken as a synonym of “trans” or “transgender”, but the term is generally outdated within the community. The term “cisgender” will be used to describe those who, contrary to trans people, do identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Similarly, “queer” will be used as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community.

By exploring these alternative casting methods and analysing these two pieces of media, this essay aims to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each of the methods, along with explaining the historical precedents in the representation of marginalized identities and the implications in real life, both for the actors representing these characters and for the communities represented overall. It will also come to a conclusion as to which method of casting could be a better fit for different types of productions and why it is so, according to the production's priorities.

This essay will review the qualities of each of the alternative casting methods mentioned – colour-blind and identity conscious casting – by explaining how they came to be and the characteristics of each of them, and exploring the possible historical precedents. We will analyse the cases of *Hamilton* and *POSE*, taking into account both the source material itself as well as positive and negative reviews and think pieces with regard to the casting choices and the aim for representation at large, and also the intentions of the creators. The book *Hamilton: The Revolution* (2016) describes the creation of the show and its casting process in great detail, so it will be one of the main sources of information regarding the making of *Hamilton*. In the case of *POSE*, and because the series was clearly influenced by it, the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990) will be briefly explored in order to find the similarities between the real-life people who populated the ballroom scene and the characters in the series, and the controversy surrounding the documentary.

The first section of the essay will explore the issues of racial representation on stage. We will introduce the problematic historical precedents of “blackface” and “yellowface” with the examples of minstrel shows and the controversy surrounding the 1991 production of *Miss Saigon* on Broadway starring Jonathan Pryce. This section will analyse the case of *Hamilton*, whose casting blurs the lines between colour-blind and colour-conscious, and the different opinions regarding representation – is *Hamilton* good enough? The second section will deal with identity-conscious casting and the case study of *POSE*, which will include an analysis of the historical precedents of transgender and gender-nonconforming identities in media and the consequences of casting cisgender people to play these transgender characters by briefly analysing *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020), along with a brief history of the ballroom culture of 80s and 90s New

York and the documentary *Paris is Burning*. Finally, the essay will conclude which of these alternative casting methods has more advantages and thus improves the representation of marginalized identities, and which types of productions would benefit more from either of the casting methods.

Before diving into the subject matter at length, I am aware that my context as a white Spanish woman is very different to that of the people involved in historical events and the pieces of media that I am about to analyse. From the beginning of this project, it has been one of my goals to find sources close to the subject matter and amplify their voices as best as I can, not to speak for BIPOC or transgender people or over them, but to analyse these pieces of media taking their perspectives into account.

1. Colour-blind casting and *Hamilton*: An American Musical

In this chapter, we will look at the historical representation of race on stage, starting with blackface performers in minstrel shows and analysing the history of yellowface and the controversy of the 1990 production of *Miss Saigon*. In the musical, the main antagonist (the Engineer) is written as an Euroasian character, but the role was given to white actor Jonathan Pryce. After this, to mark the evolution and new recent approaches to the issue we will analyse the casting method of *Hamilton*, taking into account the writing and casting process, the initial reactions during the Obama Administration, and the reactions in 2020, during the Trump Administration and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Historical perspectives on the issue of race on stage: “blackface” and “yellowface”

Before speaking about the representation of race on the American stage in our times, we have to first take a look back and check the historical record to see the developments since the early days. When the experts have done this, they have identified pre-Civil War practices like the Minstrel show. These were theatre performances that first developed in New York in the 1830s, where white actors wore blackface makeup with the objective of portraying racial stereotypes of black people. Frederick Douglass – American social reformer, abolitionist, and the most important figure in the movement for civil rights in the 19th century – described these actors as "...the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens" (Douglass 1848). In an article for the National Museum of African American History and culture, musicologist and historian Dale Cockrell notes that working-class white people, who felt they were “squeezed politically, economically, and socially from the top, but also from the bottom, invented minstrelsy” as a way to express how they felt being members of the white majority, but still outside the norm (National Museum of African American History and Culture 2018). black men were characterized as lazy, ignorant, superstitious, hypersexual, and as thieves and cowards. Perhaps the most popular character in this theatre genre was Jim Crow, developed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who performed his routine in blackface and tattered clothes. This character was based on a regional folklore figure long popular

amongst black enslaved people, and Rice also appropriated a traditional slave song called *Jump Jim Crow* which he used in his number. According to W.T. Lhamon Jr.,

Within a few years, Rice and his approving publics turned Jim Crow into an inaugural icon of international popular culture. From a local figure whom rice and indigo workers down the coastal Carolinas to the Caribbean used to express and explore their hopes and fears, Jim Crow burgeoned into a complex of meanings that publics fought to control wherever they spoke variants of English (Lhamon 2003, 3).

White men had been performing in blackface since before the American Revolution, but until the War of 1812 these characters had used dialects that were more similar to that of Englishmen than Afro-American. The shift to a culture that was distinctly American came after the war, and that is precisely when blackface characters became “increasingly Afro-American” (Toll 1974, 26). By the end of the 1820’s blackface troupes toured the whole country “performing alleged Negro songs and dances” (Toll 1974, 27). Many of the melodies for these songs were of British origin, while the lyrics resembled Afro-American dialects. Until the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851), the few black characters there were in American drama and literature were always minor characters and usually the comic relief. These minor characters were “less influenced by minstrelsy” than the ones that would come after (Toll 1974, 29). These typical characters were, for the most part, happy slaves who loved their master and would not leave him even when they were offered freedom.

By the end of the 1850s, minstrel shows had become variety entertainment rather than the satire of the 1840s. These shows now included “Bedouin Arabs”, female impersonators, Chinese dances and plantation sketches that “became even more unrealistic depictions of southern life” (Mahar 1999, 37). Before the 1850’s some minstrel shows depicted the cruelty slaves suffered at the plantations, showing that slavery was oppressive and undemocratic (as abolitionists, but certainly not society at large, thought at the time), even though they “completely rejected any notion of the equality of the races” (Toll 1974, 66), as some still portrayed the trope of the “happy slave” at the plantation. By the 1850’s, this empathic approach to slavery virtually disappeared, and white superiority was upheld: the topic of slavery was seen as the issue that could make or break the Union, allowing “millions of blacks to challenge whites for land, jobs, and status” (Toll 1974, 66). The people behind minstrels “knew blacks did not belong in the North.

When they could not get rid of blacks, Northern whites forced them to live like inferiors and then used their behavior as “proof” that Negroes were inherently incompetent people who had the same opportunities as everyone else but could do nothing with them” (Toll 1974, 68). During the Civil War, minstrels acted as political propaganda. They reported on war news that would “anger, encourage or stimulate their audiences to further commitment to the Union” (Toll 1974, 107).

Throughout the minstrelsy eras audiences shaped the shows. According to Toll, if theatre audiences “enjoyed a speech, song, or bit of acting, they cheered and demanded encores”, while “when they were displeased, people in the gallery and the pit hissed at the performers, and shouted out their preferences” (Toll 1974, 11). Even though these were supposed to be comical performances and were seen that way at the time, “Rules of Hall” were listed in the programs of early minstrel shows, pleading the audience members not to whistle or stomp their feet to the beat. This same issue still existed in 1875 when Duprez and Benedicts Minstrels published “Rules for Visiting a Place of Amusement,” a satirical piece which brought to light what was “normal behaviour” at a minstrel: “eat peanuts, whistle and stamp your feet so everybody will know you’re an old theatre-goer [...] be sure and bring lots of tobacco to smoke and chew. Spit all over the floor” (Toll 1974, 12). These shows used audience-performer interaction to make sure theatregoers enjoyed the performance, which most of the time meant to keep the audience laughing.

After the Civil War, minstrelsy changed – eventually, they “shifted away from Negro topics, they did not, however, automatically discard their blackface [...] Set apart from the society, believed to be mentally inferior and immature, black characters could express serious criticism without compelling the listener to take them seriously” (Toll 1974, 161). By the 1870’s, the minstrel show had changed “rapidly into something like a ‘tired businessman’s show’”, and “coloured performers” were much in demand (Wittke 1930, 85-90). By 1896, *The New York Clipper* listed ten minstrel companies, and by 1919 the list had been reduced to three (Wittke 1930, 111). The professional American minstrel show was over, although it still existed in amateur productions until the 1960s.

Similarly to blackface, yellowface makeup was used by white actors in order to portray East Asians in film and theatre. It was the norm for Hollywood actors to use prosthetics around the eyes and other types of makeup well into the 20th century, many

Golden Age actors have donned yellowface in their movies: Katharine Hepburn, Fred Astaire, Ingrid Bergman, John Wayne and Marlon Brando are just a few names. Before Hollywood films, yellowface performances had existed in the U.S for over 200 years. Voltaire's *Orphelin de la Chine* (1755) was adapted by Irish playwright Arthur Murphy into *Orphan of China* (1759), which was performed in New York for the first time in 1768 (Lee 2019). Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of this practice is Mickey Rooney's Mr Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). Many reviewers at the time did not even acknowledge Rooney's yellowface in their articles, but others like James Powers from *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that the character was "a caricature and will be offensive to many" (Powers 1961). In 2013, a new adaptation of the Truman Capote novella opened on Broadway. In this version, the character of Mr Yunioshi is played by Japanese American actor James Yaegashi. In an interview with Rafu Shimpo, he called Rooney's portrayal "one of the most notorious cases of yellowface" and explained that in order to understand his character, it is important to go back to Capote's novella (which is set during World War II), where "he's a real character, for starters [...] Yunioshi is a Nisei, a Japanese American from California. In the movie, Mickey Rooney played him as if he was fresh off the boat. [...] He's a successful photographer, high-end, from California... People he loves are interned while he's out in New York living the high life" (Yamamoto 2013). From the example of this adaptation, we can infer that the alternate casting methods this essay explores can help give new versions of older pieces of media new nuance.

Miss Saigon (1989) is a stage musical based on Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904). The musical's plot begins in the titular city of Saigon in the 1970s, during the Vietnam War, where we meet our main characters: Kim, a seventeen-year-old bar girl; Chris, an American GI, and the Engineer – a French-Vietnamese pimp who owns "Dreamland" the bar where the action first takes places. The character of the Engineer was originated by Jonathan Pryce in the West End, who used yellowface makeup in his role. When the producers decided to move the show to Broadway in 1990 with the original cast, they were received with an enormous wave of controversy. First came a letter from B.D. Wong, an Asian-American actor who strongly opposed the idea that Pryce would play the role of the Engineer on Broadway, arguing that it meant taking jobs away from actors of Asian origin. Wong asked the Actors' Equity Association to block the actor's visa, which they had to approve, along with those of all the other non-American actors,

for the production to move to Broadway. Equity responded by barring Pryce from performing on Broadway at first, but then producers decided they would not open on Broadway without Pryce, and Equity reversed their decision. The show went on to have a successful run on Broadway even though there were protests at the door, Pryce won the Tony Award that year, but that was the last time that a white person played the role of the Engineer in the US (Ryde 2019, 7).

Miss Saigon is still a topic of discussion when it comes to the representation of Asian women, especially in relationships with white (American) men. The female characters in the play are women who have been caught in the middle of a war and are subjected to prostitution by the Engineer. They have to have sexual relationships with American soldiers, who they see as an opportunity to maybe have a passage to the US and escape the war, and on the other hand, these women are seen as “a sexual object to be “conquered” by the white hero” (Yu 2019). In spite of this, *Miss Saigon* needs East Asian actors in order to work, so it offers opportunities to actors who usually do not get jobs if the character does not need to be of that specific origin. It would be ideal to have stories written and performed by Asian Americans on Broadway have the same exposure and success as *Miss Saigon*, but we need audiences to be discerning and avoid stereotype-filled plays.

“Non-traditional” casting was endorsed by the Actors’ Equity Association in the 1980s in order for actors of colour to have more opportunities. They defined this practice as “the casting of ethnic minority and female actors in roles where race, ethnicity, or sex is not germane” (Eisenberg 1988). Colour-blind casting is a type of non-traditional casting where the race of the actors cast in the piece is not taken into account when developing it and it does not have an important role in the storyline. This method has been debated in more recent years, with Snehal Desai, artistic director of the Asian theater company East West Players in Los Angeles (the longest-running theater of color in the United States) saying that “The thing about colorblind casting is that it denies the person standing in front of you [...] It ignores identity, and for people of color, that further alienates us” (Gelt 2022). According to Diep Tran, associate editor of American Theatre magazine, “A better term is color-conscious [...] Color-conscious means we’re aware of the historic discrimination in the entertainment industry, and we’re also aware of what it means to put a body of color onstage” (Gelt 2022). In the following section we will

analyse the case of *Hamilton* (2015). The casting method utilized for this piece could be considered colour-blind because the creators did not envision a specific race for each character, but it is colour-conscious because despite this, they knew they wanted most of the characters (with the exception of King George) to be played by BIPOC actors.

The case of *Hamilton*: An American Musical

Hamilton: An American Musical (2015) is a biographical musical based on Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, with music, lyrics and libretto by Lin-Manuel Miranda. The idea of this musical (a hip-hop mixtape and concept album in the beginning) came to Miranda as soon as he started reading Chernow's biography in 2008. He first performed a song from the musical in "An Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken Word" in the White House in front of President Obama. This song, "Alexander Hamilton", would go on to be the opening and one of the most recognisable songs from the musical. Miranda had already used hip-hop as a medium in his previous musical *In the Heights*, which focuses on the immigrant (mainly Latino) community of the Washington Heights neighbourhood in Manhattan, where he grew up. As he read the biography, it seemed to him that despite having died more than 200 years ago, Alexander Hamilton was very similar to a modern-day hip-hop star. Tommy Kail, *Hamilton*'s director explains that Alexander Hamilton was "someone born into very difficult circumstances – profound poverty, no parents, no support – who used words to elevate himself out of those circumstances, and then died violently because of those words. That's a classic hip-hop story" (Hootoon 2020). Chernow attended a rehearsal early on in the production of the show, he was "shocked" by the fact that the men who were playing Washington, Hamilton and other Founding Fathers were black and Latino: I remember... thinking 'Oh my goodness, they're all black and Latino! What on earth is Lin-Manuel thinking? [...] I need to sit down and talk to Lin-Manuel alone. We're talking about the founding fathers of the United States" (Monteiro 2016, 93). He was not accustomed to rap music and had not thought that those who were better suited to performing these songs were not going to look like their historical counterparts. Miranda and Kail had this as a principle since the beginning "This is a story about America then, told by America now" (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 33). This quote became the slogan of the show, used in

advertising and implying that the cast reflected “Obama’s America.” But this implication also means that “America then” had little or no important black and brown figures.

In her review of the show, Monteiro reflects on this very fact “The idea that this musical ‘looks like America looks now’ in contrast to ‘then,’ however, is misleading and actively erases the presence and role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since. America ‘then’ did look like the people in this play, if you looked outside of the halls of government. This has never been a white nation” (Monteiro 2016, 93). The titular role of Alexander Hamilton would go on to be played by Lin-Manuel Miranda himself. The fact that Hamilton was an immigrant from the Caribbean is mentioned by other characters at various points throughout the play, most times to discredit him to the point that when Jefferson, Madison and Burr find out about the Reynolds Scandal and try to blackmail Hamilton about it, they tell him “ya best g’wan run back where ya come from” (from “We Know”), in a Caribbean manner of speaking, giving their actions an anti-immigrant, xenophobic perspective to their dislike of Hamilton – one that audiences nowadays can relate to, a clear example being President Trump’s anti-immigrant discourse. Either way, the show “ultimately shows support for immigrants like Hamilton in not only having him be the central character but also in showing his successes, which are further articulated in lines such as ‘Immigrants, we get the job done,’ from ‘The Battle of Yorktown’. This idea reflects the experience of many modern day immigrants, including Miranda’s own father” (Seastrom 2024, 6-7).

Miranda started considering who could play the different roles while he was reading Chernow’s biography, and he was especially interested on who could play George Washington. At the time, he was still performing *In the Heights*, and during one of these performances, while he was standing off-stage with his co-star Chris Jackson he asked him if he wanted to play Washington, to which he responded, “Sure”. In *Hamilton: the Revolution* Jeremy McCarter explains Jackson’s casting as follows:

Chris Jackson has the makings of a Washington for reasons that anybody can see and hear. He has a tall, athletic stature that suits the finest horseman in all Virginia. [...] Like Washington, Chris seems to lead out of instinct, not some will to rule. [...] Up to a point, the Hamilton audience is cheering someone they’ve been watching for nearly 20 years. But when he makes that brisk, bold entrance – a black man striding straight downstage, slamming his sword into a scabbard – the thought crosses your mind: Is Chris

somehow getting all of these people to cheer for George Washington himself? (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 58)

When it comes to the character of Angelica Schuyler, Hamilton's sister-in-law, the casting notice description (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 78) says that she is a combination of Nicki Minaj and Desiree Armfeldt from *A Little Night Music*. Renée Elise Goldsberry, who would go on to play her off-Broadway and on the original run on Broadway, left Miranda, Kail and Oskar Eustis (director of the Public Theatre) "looking genuinely stunned, as if lightning had flashed through the room" (Miranda and McCarter 2016, 78) because of her speed when performing "Satisfied". According to Miranda "Renée was the first one who came in and made us say, 'Oh, she thinks exactly that fast'", and according to McCarter, Miranda had not conceived the song in order for an actor to show off, but to symbolize that the character was brilliant and had read Hamilton perfectly as soon as she met him. Goldsberry had performed Shakespearean roles, appeared on Broadway a handful of times, and done some TV, which made her a good choice for a show as demanding as Hamilton (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 79).

Sometime after the producers had decided that *The Hamilton Mixtape* would in fact be a stage musical, an audience of around 150 friends and Broadway professionals witnessed what would become Act One. Actor Leslie Odom Jr was in that audience and sent Miranda a text saying he was really looking forward to the stage version. Kail and Miranda thought that the actors who had been playing Aaron Burr (the antihero who shoots Hamilton at the end of the show), had been too similar to Miranda. According to him, "What was great about Leslie is that in every way he's a contrast to me. [...] He is cool, his blood runs cool, he is elegant." That is precisely the difference between Hamilton and Burr in the show, while Hamilton's ambition drives him to write, fight, try to change things, sometimes without thinking about what can happen to him; Burr's same ambition lets him stop and think of the consequences first, they are two sides of the same coin and equal in a way (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 88-90).

Miranda and Kail soon decided to have Hamilton's enemies in Act Two (Thomas Jefferson and James Madison) played by the same actors that played his friends (the Marquis de Lafayette and Hercules Mulligan) in Act One. They would need "a couple of supremely dynamic actors" for this feat to work (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 148).

Daveed Diggs was chosen to play Lafayette and Jefferson, and it was in part because of his experience with split identities: he was raised by a black father and a white Jewish mother, he had gone to Brown University, but had grown up in a conflictive part of Oakland, he had a career as an actor, and another one as a rapper. On the other hand, they chose Okieriete Onaodowan, whose transformation was even more challenging from the Irish-American tailor and spy Hercules Mulligan, the muscle in the friend group to sickly James Madison. In McCarter's words, "If Hamilton had five acts, Oak would play five roles" (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 148). Diggs was 34 at the time, and had long abandoned his childhood dream of performing on Broadway because it did not seem to have a place for him, he did not even have an agent by the time performances started. Onaodowan, on his part, had grown up in New Jersey and used theatre as a way to avoid getting in trouble when he was in school. His parents, who had immigrated from Nigeria, managed to save up some money to get him theatre training after graduation. Both of these actors thought playing a Founding Father was a very special opportunity, with Onaodowan saying he is "hyperconscious" when choosing who to play, and would not like doing "another show about a messed-up black kid" (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 149). Diggs describes how seeing a black actor playing any of the Founding Fathers as a child would have changed how he viewed his own opportunities, "A whole lot of things I just never thought were for me would have seemed possible" (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 149). And "I walked out of the show with a sense of ownership over American history. Part of it is seeing brown bodies play these people." (Monteiro 2016, 93). And this would be proved when school trips arrived on Broadway to see Hamilton, Bill Coulter's Brooklyn class reacted to the show as follows:

"Some of them were just absolutely blown away," he says. "They were saying, 'George Washington wasn't black, Mr. Coulter!' I said, 'Obviously he wasn't guys.'" He asked the kids how the casting affected them. "They said, 'It just made me really proud, and feel good about being American. Like I belong here.'" (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 159)

Miranda knew from the beginning that he wanted the show to have an educational component. EduHam was a project that involved Miranda himself, Jeffery Seller (producer), the NYC Department of Education, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. The program's goal was to connect students with the founding era by using *Hamilton*, providing them with educational resources (online

access to lesson plans, quizzes, interactive activities), subsidized tickets for the show, etc. (Seastrom 2024, 30). The program aimed to reach low-income background schools, but it soon expanded, including schools all over the country. This meant that students who perhaps did not feel that the founding history of their country included them, felt more included by approaching it through a different lens.

Many of the cast's actors had spent many years getting to Broadway, and even though Anthony Ramos' career had been the shortest, it might have been the hardest to achieve. He was raised in a housing project in a rough part of Brooklyn and ended up the lead in the school musical by mistake. Paying for his training was not something him or his parents could afford, but he was able to get a Jerry Seinfeld Scholarship. After graduation, he still struggled to get parts, and he tried for *Hamilton* because a casting agent at a different audition suggested he might be good for the show. In his final callback, he says he was not acting: "I was doing 'My Shot' [...] When I was singing 'I'm not throwing away my shot', I could've exploded – I felt like a bomb inside me just went off that day". He was cast as John Laurens and Philip Hamilton, who both died young in gunfights, something he could relate to, as many people who grew up in tough neighbourhoods in America can. Director Thomas Kail says he saw that Ramos gave both of his characters "an awareness of the randomness of who gets out and who doesn't. He's seen a lot of things that he wishes he hadn't seen" (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 244)

Hip-hop is necessary for *Hamilton* to work, the show has plenty of references both to the genre and musical theatre. In a section devoted to Hamilton's references to hip hop artists, Seastrom describes:

The character of Hamilton uses polysyllabic rhymes, which is a style used by rappers Big Pun and Rakim. Hamilton also raps with an elevated flow. Flow, in this context pertains to the rhyme, rhyme schemes and rhythms of rap. An elevated flow uses a more complicated rhyming scheme and more syncopation. The use of these polysyllabic rhymes with an elevated flow was meant to demonstrate that Hamilton had a higher intellect than others [...] In juxtaposition, Laurens, Lafayette, and Mulligan all rap with an 'old-school' flow with predictable rhymes and beats. (Seastrom 2024, 17)

In the show, there are also specific lyrics that reference famous lyrics: "the line 'only nineteen but my mind is older' is a direct quote from Mobb Deep's 'Shook Ones, Pt. 2'. The use of this line equates the struggle of inner-city youth to Hamilton's struggle: he is a strong individual who overcame poverty, abandonment, and the death of his

mother” (Seastrom 2024, 18). McCarter explains that these “shout-outs have a subtle second meaning. They’re another way of saying that American history can be told and retold, claimed and reclaimed, even by people who don’t look like George Washington and Betsy Ross. Alexander Hamilton, who spent his life trying to live down his lowly origins, knew better that the other founding fathers that even something as unprecedented and revolutionary as the United States would carry the traces of many tangled traditions” (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 95). When reading Chernow’s biography of Hamilton, Miranda saw similarities between the founding father and hip-hop legend Tupac Shakur, who was fatally shot in 1996. “Shakur wrote intricate, socially nuanced lyrics [...] [He] was also extremely undiplomatic, publicly calling out rappers he hated. Miranda recognized a similar rhethoric talent in Hamilton, and a similar, fatal failure to know when enough was enough” (Mead 2015).

When deciding which theatre to do the Off-Broadway run in, Miranda and his producers soon arrived at the conclusion that the Public Theater was the place to go to. It had been the birthplace of such iconic and socially conscious productions as *A Chorus Line* and *Hair*, and its current artistic director was Oskar Eustis. Eustis, whose father was involved in Democratic politics (like Miranda’s), and whose mother and grandfather were members of the Communist Party often quoted Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, saying “All things in common nature should produce / Without sweat and endeavor”. He invests in the development and production of scripts by upcoming voices (even though at this point Miranda was hardly a new voice, he had already won a few Tony’s with *In the Heights*). He was also involved in the production of a play that had become central to the cultural landscape of the US at the time like *Hamilton* was going to do, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 103). In Eustis’s words, “by telling the story of the founding of the country through the eyes of a bastard, immigrant orphan, told entirely by people of color, he is saying, ‘this is our country. We get to lay claim to it” (Kajikawa, 2018, 471).

After opening at the Public Theater, *Hamilton* was not only being praised by the musical theatre community, but by the hip-hop community as well. Questlove felt that the show legitimised hip-hop as a medium through which stories could be told to general audiences in the way singing and dancing had been up to that point. In 2015, *Billboard* declared the original cast recording the Best Rap Album of the Year, along with giving it

a five-star review. This award legitimised that the hip-hop culture utilized by the show was not pastiche or a way to make the show more relevant for new audiences but the medium that the show needed, and that the writing was not only good musical theatre but good hip-hop in general. The choice to have a cast of BIPOC actors, when seen together with the fact that hip hop was originated by black people, the audience can interpret that even though what they are seeing is the history of white America, it is told by a group of people that have been historically excluded from the narrative, and using their own vernacular (Seastrom 2024, 8).

As this essay has already proved, the original cast of *Hamilton* has expressed that the show helped them reconcile with the feeling of being American and the origins of the country, but they do not forget that the characters they are portraying were real people. In reality, most of them were slaveholding white people who did not abolish slavery after winning the war. In the summer of 2015, a white supremacist murdered nine people at one of the oldest black churches in the South of the United States. The company felt that the fight was not over. Christopher Jackson's Washington sings his resigning speech in "One Last Time" and the actor tries to get to the core of who his character was – he "won't reconcile" the fact that he said that all people should be able to find a safe haven in America, and yet he owned slaves. At the very end of the show, Eliza mentions that Hamilton "could have done so much more" about slavery if he had not died so soon and Jackson's Washington bows his head in shame for what he did and did not do. (Miranda and McCarter 2015, 208).

The casting in *Hamilton* has been understood as colour-blind in the sense that the real historical figures in the show, including those who were white, are played by BIPOC actors, but the fact is that this decision was very much thought out in a way to portray "America then, told by America now" added to the fact that the genres chosen for the songs were mainly hip-hop and rhythm-and-blues, which are originally very much black and Latino genres. As proved by the excerpts describing the casting process, the creatives knew they wanted POC actors to portray the characters, but they did not seem to envision a specific ethnicity for each character. According to Seastrom, "The excitement over the play being a way for marginalized groups to claim their place in the US mirrors the excitement many felt over Barack Obama becoming the first black president of the US, which was the era when the show was released" (Seastrom 2024, 33). But this decision

was not free of critique, during the Trump Administration and when the live recording of the show was released on Disney+ in July of 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many thought that the choice to cast BIPOC characters as historical white men and women was both diminishing the impact of the very questionable actions of these figures (i.e. slaveholding) and erasing the real life people of colour who aided in the revolution.

The multiracial cast paradoxically demonstrates fought-for progress and discourages further radical action. [...] Moreover, seeing people of color in leading and leadership roles is inspiring and life-affirming. Considering that artists of color occupy only twenty percent of roles on and off Broadway, and that those roles tend to be small and/or stereotypical, the creative team of *Hamilton* should be applauded. At the same time, given that Black, Latina/o, Asian, and mixed-race actors are playing almost exclusively elite White characters, the casting somewhat asks spectators to forget the salience of race and racism to the actual founding of the United States. The actors do not play slaves or indigenous people. Neither do they discuss settler colonialism. In *Hamilton*, the founding of the United States is the feat of great men. (Galella 2015)

Author Toni Morrison reportedly “hated” *Hamilton* so much she helped fund Ishmael Reed’s play *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda*, in which the Founding Fathers visited the composer in the style of *A Christmas Carol* with the intent to make him understand his mistake (Nolan 2021). Reed told Current Affairs: “They cast Black people in order to defend projects that [Black people] might find objectionable. It sort of distracts from the racism of the white historical characters”. (Nolan 2021). On his part, Miranda confronted these claims, posting “All the criticisms are valid. The sheer tonnage of complexities & failings of these people I couldn't get. Or wrestled with but cut. I took 6 years and fit as much as I could in a 2.5 hour musical. Did my best. It's all fair game” (Miranda 2020) about the criticism he was receiving after the show was released. In “Headfirst into an Abyss”, Craft claims that if *Hamilton* had been about a Revolutionary era slave rather than a founding father, it would not have had the same success, and “yet *Hamilton* also claims the ‘national project’ on its own terms through its use of hip hop and insistence on multiracial casting as a critical part of its message. Looking at the lens of cultural citizenship helps to articulate *Hamilton*’s most resounding theme and to understand the complex, multivalent nature of its impact as it seeks to lay full claim to US history, identity and belonging” (Craft 2018, 435). In an interview with the *New Yorker*, cast member Christopher Jackson said “The Broadway audience doesn’t like to

be preached to... By having a multicultural cast, it gives us, as actors of color, the chance to provide an additional context just by our presence onstage, filling these characters up” (Monteiro 2016, 96).

Hamilton was also criticized for playing into the “founders chic” trope. This term applies to history writing but also other history-focused experiences such as house tours at sites such as Mount Vernon, Monticello or Hamilton Grange. In his review article “Founders Chic”, Francis D. Cogliano describes the term as “an excessive fascination with the thoughts and actions of a small group of elite men at the expense of other political actors and social groups” (Cogliano 2005, 412). *Hamilton* was accused of following this formula by historian David Waldstreicher. “Founders chic historians employ slavery when it serves to upraise the character of their heroes, i.e. Adams and Hamilton, and diss their flawed characters, i.e. Jefferson” (Monteiro 2016, 95). Slavery is outright mentioned in Act 1 by John Laurens in “Stay Alive”: “I stay at work with Hamilton. / We write essays against slavery. / And every day’s a test of our camaraderie / and bravery”; then again by Hamilton and Laurens in unison in “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down”: “We’ll never be free until we end slavery!”. Then, the word “slave” or “slavery” does not appear in the lyrics until Act 2 in “Cabinet Battle #1”, when Hamilton responds to Jefferson with: “A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor. / Your debts are paid cuz you don’t pay for labor. / ‘We plant seeds in the South. We create.’ Yeah, keep ranting. / We know who’s really doing the planting.”; and then, the issue of slavery not spoken about again until after Hamilton’s death in “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”, when Eliza sings: “I speak out against slavery. / You could have done so much more if you only had time”.

These excerpts, along another one that paints the picture of Hamilton in his childhood seeing slave ships come and go from his home in the Caribbean, are the only times the words “slave”, “slaver” or “slavery” are sung in *Hamilton* explicitly. When spoken by Laurens in Act 1 and by Eliza in the show’s final moments, it serves to secure Hamilton’s legacy as an abolitionist, and when spoken by Hamilton himself against Jefferson in Act 2, it serves the purpose of painting Jefferson as the antagonist and Hamilton as the hero. The truth is that Hamilton was a member of the New York Manumission Society, and the Schuylers (his wife’s family) were major slaveowners. Even though Hamilton himself did not own slaves, he was involved in transaction such

as hiring enslaved people from their owners to work for him. As *Hamilton* follows Chernow's biography, "which speaks of Hamilton's abolitionism at every opportunity while eliding his involvement with slavery. One wonders whether, had he employed a person of color as his historian, Miranda would have been able to write a play that downplays race and slavery to the extent that this one does" (Monteiro 2016, 96).

All in all, it is clear that casting BIPOC actors as the real life figures in *Hamilton* was a conscious choice for many reasons: one, that the show was about an immigrant – it is mentioned throughout the show that Alexander Hamilton was born in the Caribbean, was orphaned at a young age, and moved to New York to find a better life, like many people do nowadays; two, that the genres chosen for the songs were mainly hip-hop and rhythm and blues, genres originated and popularised by black and Latino artists. Even though the various criticisms of this choice are valid, it is important to remember that *Hamilton* was written and opened on Broadway during Obama's Administration, when having a black president for the first time, people were optimistic about a post-racial society being closer than ever. It is true that we need more original BIPOC stories, written and performed by these communities, but it is also true that having a show as attractive to all kinds of people be performed by black, Latino and Asian actors was a step in the right direction, at least for the future of Broadway actors. In *Hamilton: The Revolution*, Jeremy McCarter details the casting process of the main characters in the show: some of them were offered the parts directly by the creators and others auditioned, but all of them were cast because of their skill at embodying the characters Miranda had envisioned for the show.

2. Identity conscious casting and POSE (2018-2021)

This section will deal first with a brief history of transgender representation, taking the documentary *Disclosure* (2020) as a main source of information, as it features many transgender people in the Hollywood industry, from actors to producers and directors, reflecting on various damaging tropes that transgender characters have been a part of in film. After this, we will analyse the series *POSE* which features the biggest cast of transgender and queer actors to date, and many trans writers, directors and producers as well. Because it is one of the series' main sources of inspiration we will also reflect on the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990) and its consequences for the LGBTQ+ community.

Historical precedents of trans and gender non-conforming people in film.

Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen (2020) is a documentary with interview-style questions to various transgender people who are in the Hollywood television and film industry. Gender transgression has been present in cinema since its beginnings: in D.W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) – a film that is praised to this day for being the first motion picture to feature a cut that advances the plot – there is a eunuch role played by a man in women's clothes (Feder 2020, 08:27). That same year, *The Florida Enchantment* came out – in this film, a white lady and her black maid eat a seed that makes them wake up as men. The white lady becomes a dandy, and the stereotype of what a rich white man should be, while the maid becomes a violent and aggressive valet. Cross-dressing and blackface in the early era of silent films were closely linked, as well as misogyny and racism (Feder 2020, 11:13). In "Cross-dressing and Sex Role Reversals in American Film," Bell-Metereau explains that even though women who imitated males (e.g., Marlene Dietrich) in early Hollywood films "gained in status and freedom", "from 1935 to 1960, Hollywood self-censorship restricted female impersonation to farcical matrons of relatively low prestige" (Bell-Metereau 1981, 6).

In *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020) Nick Adams (Director of Trans Media and Representation at GLAAD¹) reflects that “For decades Hollywood has taught audiences how to react to trans people. And sometimes, they’re being taught that the way to react to us is fear. That we’re dangerous, that we’re psychopaths, that we’re serial killers, that we must be deviants or perverts. Why else would you wear a dress if you’re a man?” (Feder 2020, 16:57) This intervention in the documentary is set to scenes from *Dressed To Kill* (1980), *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) and *Psycho* (1960). In *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), it is suggested that Buffalo Bill might be transgender, but Clarice says: “There’s no correlation in the literature between transsexualism and violence. Transexuals are very passive”. Both the book and the film conclude that Bill is not trans, but it is still collectively remembered as a trans character, and one of the most prevalent ones at that – a serial killer who hunts women down and skins them to wear their bodies. His motive for murder is to appropriate the bodies of women, and to literally wear their skin. It is important to note that even to this day, trans-exclusionary individuals argue that trans women appropriate the female form and are a threat to cisgender women in safe spaces (i.e. bathrooms, changing rooms, etc). In her essay “Brandon Goes to Hollywood: *Boys Don’t Cry* and the Transgender Body in Film,” Melissa Rigney reflects on how “This film implies that biological sex is fixed at birth, that the desire to change one’s biological sex is rooted in abnormality and psychosis, and that the ultimate and unattainable wish to change one’s sex leads to both madness and murder” (Rigney 2003, 5).

Transgender and gender non-conforming people in media have traditionally been portrayed as one of three things: they either are scary serial killers (as in the examples above), they serve as a catalyst for the development of the cis protagonist (*Dallas Buyers Club*) or they are the comedic relief (Conrad 2015, 4). According to actress and trans activist Laverne Cox, “There is a history of black men in America being painted as hyper-masculine and almost predatory in relationship to white womanhood. And there is a history of emasculating black men in this country [...] during slavery and during Jim Crow, when black men were lynched, often their genitalia was cut off. And so, a black man donning a dress is this emasculating thing” (Feder 2020, 13:07). Black comedians

¹ GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) is an American non-governmental media monitoring organization. It was originally started in order to protest against defamatory portrayals of gay and lesbian people and has since included bisexual and transgender demographics.

seem to have cross-dressed in film as a rite of passage – from Flip Wilson as Geraldine Jones for *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974), to Eddie Murphy as Mama and Grandma Klump in *The Nutty Professor* films (1996 and 2000). In *White Famous* (2017), the main character is encouraged to wear a dress by Jamie Foxx, and when he puts it on, he finds out that his penis has disappeared. “Putting a black man in a dress, in some people’s minds takes away the threat. ‘Oh, we can laugh now,’” Cox describes. She adds how early in her transition she would get into a subway car and people would just burst with laughter. She thinks audiences have been trained to have that reaction to femme-presenting trans and gender non-conforming black people by watching this trope. Meanwhile, many of the comedians that play these stereotypical black women in the media say that they aim to pay homage to black women with these characters. This trope is in fact problematic not only for black trans women (because they can be equated to a comical performance of femininity), but for black women in general. In her essay “Fallacy of the Nut Pussy: Cross Dressing, Black Comedy, and Women” Moore states that “these characters are intentionally absurd in demeanor and appearance. Regardless whether intended as homage or cruel parody, the origins of the BMW came out of a darker history of mockery and degradation of Black women” (Moore 2020, 90).

Cisgender men have been historically cast to play the parts of transgender women in film and television, and even in the most well-meaning portrayals (such as that of Eddie Redmayne for *The Danish Girl* in 2015), this decision only serves to reinforce the idea that these women are men after all. In *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), the character Leon Shermer is based on real-life trans woman Elizabeth Eden, who was a remarkably beautiful woman. At first, the producers of the film went out to trans actress Elizabeth Coffey Williams, but decided against casting her because she “looked too much like a ‘real’ woman,” and cast cisgender actor Christopher Sarandon in her place (Feder 2020, 1:00:37). Sarandon went on to be nominated for an Oscar for this role, as many other cis men playing trans women were nominated or won major awards: John Lithgow in *The World According to Garp* (1982), Cillian Murphy in *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) or the already mentioned Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl* (2015). Even though some of these performances have been sensitive and awarded for their quality, what is remarkable about them most of the time is the “transness” – Eddie Redmayne’s performance in *The Danish Girl* is remarkable most of all because of the way that he was able to reflect this femininity. Contrary to this, if a

trans person portrayed a similar character, they would not have to play the “transness” of the character and the audience would be able to see a more well-rounded person. Conrad reflects on this same issue when analysing the casting of Hilary Swank (a cisgender actress) as real-life trans man Brandon Teena (who was murdered in 1993 at the age of 21):

Allowing a cisgender woman to play the role of Brandon Teena serves to position transness as inherently performative, as opposed to a concrete gender identity. It positions transness as a costume that cisgender people can put on and take off at their discretion, and as something that can be mimicked without any meaningful engagement with the trans community. It also begs the question of the identities of the actors that were turned away in that casting decision, specifically the possibility that an actual transgender man could have successfully played the role of Brandon Teena, which would have allowed for greater visibility for and by the transgender community. (Conrad 2015, 5-6)

In *Disclosure*, Jen Richards describes how having men play trans women is linked to the violence straight men exert against them (Feder 2020, 1:01:59). She explains how a lot of this violence comes from their view that if their environment new they had been with a trans woman, they would see them as gay. She says this view is influenced by the trans women they know from the media – according to a GLAAD study from 2015, 84% of Americans do not personally know anyone who is transgender (GLAAD 2015). These transgender female characters are played by men they recognize off-screen. If trans women were played by people who live as women off-screen, this relation would not happen. This explanation is related to the “trans panic defense”, an exculpatory strategy of legal defense in which an individual charged with violent crimes against a trans person will claim that they lost control after finding out the person was transgender – most times after having engaged or being close to engaging in sexual relations. In the case of murder, if the jury “finds that the defendant was actually and reasonably provoked, it can acquit him of murder and find him guilty of the lesser offense of voluntary manslaughter” (Lee and Kwan 2014, 77)

The case of Ryan Murphy’s *POSE* (2018-2021) and its inspiration, *Paris is Burning* (1990)

POSE is a television series created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals which aired from June 2018 to June 2021 on FX. The series follows an ensemble cast of

characters during the late 1980s and early 1990s in New York City. This cast is made up of queer and transgender people of colour who compete in underground ballroom competitions. The series is heavily inspired by Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), in which people from the ballroom community explain different aspects of their life to the audience. The documentary sheds light on the precarious lifestyle of its protagonists, who deal with unemployment, rejection by their families at an early age, etc. but also shows how they manage to survive and find community within ballroom. In these underground balls, houses (teams, but also chosen families) led by house mothers or fathers would perform catwalk shows in different categories and compete in order to win trophies after being judged by a panel of judges on a scale from 1 to 10. Pepper LaBeija, house mother of the house of LaBeija (widely considered the first ever house, founded in 1972), explains:

When someone has rejection from their mother and father, their family... when they get out into the world, they search. They search for someone to fill that void. I know this from experience, because I've had kids come and latch hold of me like I'm their mother or like I'm their father, 'cause they can talk to me and I'm gay, and they're gay. And that's where all the "ballness" and the mother business comes in. (Livingston 1990, 23:26)

According to Pepper LaBeija in the documentary, the participants at first dressed up in drag to imitate Las Vegas showgirls, then started imitating Hollywood actresses like Elizabeth Taylor or Marilyn Monroe and then, at the time it was filmed, they would imitate models like Iman and Christie Brinkley (Livingston 1990, 11:35). At that time, some of the popular categories were: Femme Queen Realness (the ability of the participant to pass for a cisgender woman), Butch Queen Realness (the ability of the participant to blend in with straight men), Runway (supermodel-style catwalks), and Voguing. The latter category consists of a style of dance whose "movement are precise, sharp, and linear, taking inspiration from Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, martial arts, and occasionally including gymnastic elements and extreme flexibility" (Winsor 2023, 79). The categories related to "realness" are judged based on the individual or team's ability to blend in with cisgender, straight society. One of the examples seen in *Paris is Burning* is Executive Realness, which is explained by Dorian Corey as follows:

In real life, you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not

an executive is just merely because of the social standing of life [...] Black people have a hard time getting anywhere. And those that do, are usually straight. In a ballroom, you can be anything you want: you're not really an executive, but you're looking like an executive, and therefore you're showing the straight world that "I can be an executive, if I had the opportunity, I could be one" (Livingston 1990, 14:30)

POSE accurately portrays the ballroom community by employing the largest cast of trans and queer actors in a scripted series to date, and also many trans writers, directors and consultants (Pensis 2019, 16). These actors, like their real-life counterparts are largely black and Latino, and most of them identify as transgender or non-binary. In the era the series is set in, and when *Paris is Burning* was filmed, the labels used by the community were not as set as they are today, so even though the word "trans" is used in the series, this term was relatively new. Some of the real-life people at the time used the term "transsexual" (most of the time these people would have undergone gender affirming surgery) or identified as "drag" or "street queens", "femmes" or "cross-dressers" (or "transvestites", which is seen as very derogatory nowadays), even those who lived their lives as women (Pensis 2019, 15).

In terms of objective statistics, the series is groundbreaking, but it is important to analyse if the representation of these identities goes further than just numbers. Some of the characters in *POSE* are heavily inspired or draw very clear parallels with some of the real people featured on *Paris is Burning*: the character of Elektra, mother of the House of Abundance, is inspired by Dorian Corey; Blanca, even though she starts her own house in the pilot and so is a less experienced mother, is inspired by Pepper LaBeija; Pray Tell, who is the Master of Ceremonies at the balls, is inspired by Junior LaBeija; Candy, who goes on to be found dead possibly murdered by a client draws parallels with Venus Xtravaganza, who was found dead before the documentary was done filming, and Angel, who longs to be a model and eventually gets her opportunity, is inspired by Octavia St Laurent, who is filmed applying for a model contest in the documentary (a scene which is recreated in the season 2 premiere for Angel's storyline).

In the second episode of *POSE*, as the House of Evangelista prepares to celebrate their first Christmas as a family, Angel (portrayed by trans actor Indya Moore), says she does not have good memories of the festivities because she received a beating from her father after being caught stealing a pair of patent leather shoes. Moore describes how

“The same thing happened to a lot of us [...] I remember my mother catching me with a pair of skinny jeans in my book bag and whooping me from one side of the house to the other” (Brown 2019). Like many in the ballroom community, Moore, whose family were Jehova’s Witnesses, was rejected by them because of her transness and was in foster care by the age of 14. Soon, she “found a surrogate family in the New York ballroom scene, a community in which house mothers often provide a home and quasi-parental support for their ‘children’” (Brown 2019).

For writer-producer Janet Mock, it is important that “the women of *Pose* are pretty full embodied in terms of their gender identities [...] [They] are beyond the struggle with their bodies, with people calling them by their right name. These are people who are creating new ways of having family – chosen family through the ballroom networks” (Littleton 2018). When a character is written as LGBTQ+, most times their storyline will follow their struggle with a newfound identity (be it sexual orientation or gender identity), usually it will also deal with their coming out and their loved ones’ reaction to it. In *POSE*, even though the audience eventually finds out about the backstory of the main characters, it does not take up a large portion of the plot. In the pilot, we see Damon being rejected by his parents, escaping to New York City and being taken in and introduced to the ball scene by Blanca: “Balls are a gathering of people who are not welcome to gather anywhere else, a celebration of life that the rest of the world does not deem worthy of celebration. There are categories, people dress up for them, walk. There’s voting, trophies...” (Murphy 2018, 27:10). In this scene (and this episode), the audience learns about ballroom culture through Damon’s eyes.

The series sheds light on the struggles of the community at the time: HIV and AIDS, having to do sex work and the dangers that come with it, the fetishization of trans bodies, etc. At various points throughout the series, the characters perform what Bailey calls “invention” – “HIV/AIDS prevention activities that are conducted and sustained through practices and processes within at-risk communities themselves” (Bailey 2009, 255). The character of Blanca receives her HIV-positive diagnosis in the pilot, and then, when she takes Damon under her wing, she tells him that it is important that he has safe sex and is tested for STIs regularly. In the second season premiere, we see Pray Tell attend an ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) meeting where they are planning “die-in” – a type of protest where a group of people lie down as if they were dead, further

along in the season. At first, Pray Tell does not want to attend the meeting, he is taken there by Judy, a lesbian nurse who works at the AIDS ward. He is reluctant to go because he thinks this activist group is made up of “preppy white queens in ill-fitting GAP chinos, who have never had to fight for a goddamn thing in their lives” (Horder-Payton 2019, 18:01). Judy responds that there are lesbians of all races running these meetings too, and once it starts, we see Pray get emotional and change his mind when he realizes that these people are trying to fight for all the community. When Pray goes back home, he tells the rest of the House of Evangelista about the die-in at St Patrick’s Cathedral, and they agree to go together as a family. When the day of the protest comes, the family (except Elektra) show up to the cathedral along with ACT UP members to protest the Catholic church’s stance towards HIV/AIDS (Horder-Payton 2019, 30:50): the cardinal had said that abstinence was the only way to not get the virus, neglecting to endorse the use of condoms. When the die-in begins, Cardinal O’Connor asks everyone to stand up and pray, to which Angel responds “Prayer won’t cure AIDS. Prayer won’t stop the spread of HIV. Only condoms will. Abstinence is not a human solution; abstinence is the erasure of our sexuality” (Horder-Payton 2019, 32:34). After a few moments of protest, the police arrives and arrests the participants. At the next ball, when Elektra walks the category of Runway, with the theme being French Revolution, Pray Tell calls her out on her inaction towards her dying community: “How apropos, a queen who cares nothing for her kingdom [...] Remember when things were simpler, Elektra? Before our young men were dropping dead before our very eyes?” (Horder-Payton 2019, 38:54). It is important to show that the ballroom community was not sitting idly by when it comes to the AIDS crisis. In *Let the Record Show*, Sarah Schulman compiles the history of the ACT UP organization from 1987 to 1993. About the Stop the Church action of 1989, which this plot point in *POSE* was clearly inspired by, she says:

ACT UP’s actions were usually aimed at government and pharma, and came equipped with reasonable, winnable, and doable concrete demands for policy changes to help save the lives of people with AIDS. Stop the Church was different. ACT UP was not trying to change the Catholic Church, nor were we trying to negotiate. Stop the Church was a raw display of power, in the only way we could manifest it—through direct action, to demand that they “stop killing us.” It grew from a fundamental emotional frustration and anger on the part of the rank and file, who were overwhelmed by the dying of their friends, and the lack of treatment progress. It was designed as a confrontation, a revolt, a rebellion, a resistance, and it was designed to take place on enemy territory (Schulman, 233)

After *Paris is Burning*, some of its protagonists (Carmen Xtravaganza, Octavia St Laurent) came forward to denounce that they had felt exploited by the documentary. Even though it shed light on the ballroom community, which was very much unknown to outsiders at that point, the documentary has an outsider looking in perspective. We see the protagonists through Livingston's point of view, even though we only hear her ask questions sometimes, we do not see her (hooks 1992, 151) With the director being a white lesbian who had studied at Yale, the ballroom community opened their doors to her perhaps hoping that it would help them individually somehow. The documentary shows how many of the children (this is how the community refers to the members of the houses who are not house mothers or fathers, even though we see boys as young as thirteen in the film), have to perform sex work for money, describes how they "mop" (steal) clothes from high-end stores to have an outfit for the balls, or explains the meaning of "reading" or "throwing shade" both being ways of creatively insulting each other within the community. In her essay "Is Paris Burning?", bell hooks reflects on Livingston's approach to the community:

Since her presence as white woman/lesbian filmmaker is "absent" from *Paris is Burning* it is easy for viewers to imagine that they are watching an ethnographic film documenting the life of black gay "natives" and not recognize that they are watching a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to Livingston. By cinematically masking this reality [...] Livingston does not oppose the way hegemonic whiteness "represents" blackness, but rather assumes an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counter-hegemonic. By shooting the film using a conventional approach to documentary and not making clear how her standpoint breaks with this tradition, Livingston assumes a privileged location of "innocence". She is represented both in interviews and reviews as the tender-hearted, mild-mannered, virtuous white woman to venture into a contemporary "heart of darkness" to bring back knowledge of the natives. (hooks 1992, 151)

In the documentary, the ballroom community is exoticized, and its members othered – the release of the film closely coincided with the release of Madonna's "Vogue", which is also referenced in the season 2 premiere of *POSE*. Blanca is convinced that the song and its music video will make their underground scene mainstream and will bring a world of opportunity for the house members, while Pray Tell, on the other hand, tells her how other generations before them thought the same thing, giving the examples

of Village People's "Y.M.C.A" and disco: "Every generation thinks that they're gonna be the ones that are finally invited to the party. Put your glass slippers away, Trans-arella. It ain't never gonna happen" (26:41). Both the popularity of *Paris is Burning* and "Vogue", even though they helped a younger generation to find a safe haven in ballroom, also aided in the appropriation and commodification of a queer, black and Latino space and culture. For some, this commodification brought opportunity: with the release of "Vogue", people outside the ballroom community wanted to learn the dance style, and so some of the participants could find jobs as dance instructors, like Damon in *POSE*, while others would go on to perform as backup dancers for popstars like Madonna or Janet Jackson, like Ricky in *POSE* or Willi Ninja and Jose Xtravaganza in real life. It is important to note that both in the series and in real life, those who got the most opportunities out of this commodification were mostly gay men, while trans women were and still are the most vulnerable group within the community.

All in all, it is fair to say that *POSE*'s identity conscious cast helps to improve the representation of transgender and queer characters. Not only is the cast remarkable (both Billy Porter and Michaela-Jaé Rodriguez won Emmy's for their portrayals of Pray Tell and Blanca), but the fact that there are transgender people in the writers' room is also worth noting – not only are trans actors portraying trans characters, but the storylines are also written by transgender people. This helps the voices of trans people of colour, the most overlooked group within the LGBTQ+ community, be lifted and heard once and for all.

Conclusion

To conclude this essay, I wish to mention that condensing the history of representation into this short a space has been difficult. I am also aware that the discourse surrounding representation is constantly shifting and evolving, as it should be if we want to achieve true proportional representation someday.

In the first section of my essay, I focused on the historical precedents of representation: blackface minstrel shows and yellowface performances. Even though the minstrel show was active in amateur productions until the 1960s and the yellowface controversy of *Miss Saigon* happened in the 1990s, I hope that if something similar happened in our day and age, most people would oppose it. The first alternative casting method I analysed in this essay was colour-blind casting. As stated in the introduction, true colour-blind casting disregards an actor's ethnicity in order to cast them – neither the character or their storyline will acknowledge race. This method, in my opinion, could be beneficial for pieces of media that are ingrained in the popular consciousness (take a Shakespeare production or *The Green Knight* (2021), for example), it could bring new nuance to the plot. It could also be beneficial for fantasy or alternate history (i. e. the *House of the Dragon* series, *Doctor Who*).

In this section, I chose to analyse *Hamilton* (2015) because of the creators' choice to cast BIPOC actors to play historical figures who were white (including the some of the Founding Fathers of the United States). My choice to analyse this piece was influenced by the fact that even though it is my favourite musical, and it received many awards including various Tony's and a Pulitzer, I am aware that it lacks in the treatment of the existence of non-white people in the historical period it is set in. The criticism the show and its creator Lin-Manuel Miranda received are completely valid in my opinion, although I can also understand the struggles of having to condense such a long period of time into a 2.5-hour show. It truly is a pity that parts of the story that were cut (such as a heated debate on abolitionism between Jefferson and Hamilton in *Cabinet Battle #3*) were related to the real-life POC of the time.

In the second section of my essay, I focused on the representation of queer identities in the media, the Hollywood television and film industry specifically. The

documentary *Disclosure* was of great value in order to understand the historical precedents of transgender representation in Hollywood, with interviews with many trans and queer figures in the industry. In this space, even though representation is not perfect by any means, we have advanced greatly in just a few years. Identity-conscious casting takes the different facets of the character's identity (ethnicity, gender identity and presentation, sexual orientation, etc.) and searches for an actor who can match some or all of these characteristics. From my point of view, this method should not be "alternative" but the mainstream method for casting almost any piece of media, especially when there are marginalized communities involved, but I think that it is important that we take care not to box queer or trans actors into just queer or trans roles.

My choice to analyse *POSE* in this section of my essay was related to the fact that it was my introduction to the ballroom scene. Even though I knew of voguing, I did not know that there was a whole underground community populated by queer POC. Once I was introduced to this part of history, the fact that these people created a network of found families to keep each other as safe as possible in the face of adversities (HIV and AIDS being just one), seemed an extremely optimistic and human reaction. *POSE* is not only important because of its history-making cast and crew, but because the series retains this optimism and will to live that the real-life people populating the scene had, without turning its face to the dangers being queer and non-white had at the time.

Lastly, I would like to stress the importance of "own voices". If BIPOC and queer people get the opportunities to be in the writers' rooms, and assume other roles of power such as producers and directors, we will get much better written characters and storylines, that reflect the reality of the world we live in.

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