Who Tells Your Story: The Democratic Narrative from Whitman to *Hamilton*

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Lin-Manuel Miranda's award-winning musical *Hamilton* is remarkable for its fusion of theatrical and hip-hop genres.[1] Its embrace of, and allusions to classics of, those genres thus aligns it with established American popular cultural traditions. The musical can also be placed in a broader American tradition of poetic storytelling that is democratic in both its message and execution. This "democratic narrative" tradition comprises writers who attempt to embody American diversity in their poetics. These writers are democratic in three ways: first, they present various authentic American voices, and in so doing to capture the experiences of the people (a democratic content); second, they present these voices in ways that engages their readers in the poetic act itself (a democratic method); third, the theme of their writing is the democratic ideal and its processes and problems. The idea that America is a work-in-progress is essential to their writing and they actually see their writing as a part of those processes (a democratic commitment). Two preeminent writers in this tradition are Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, both of whom exemplify these traits (and perhaps originated them). *Hamilton* continues their legacy. It, too, possesses these democratic traits. It is truly, as its subtitle would have it, "an American musical."

Democratic Content

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[1] The hip-hop and musical references in the musical itself are well-attested. See, for example, https://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2016/03/18/470897683/pop-culture-happy-hour-hamilton; the rap lyrics site Genius.com, and *Hamilton: The Revolution* by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter.

Walt Whitman was a poet of the self (as in his famous "Song of Myself,") but also a poet of *selves*, i.e., the great plurality of American citizens. David S. Reynolds notes Whitman's "awareness of the rich potential of American life" as realizable through the culture of its citizens, and especially poetry (namely his).[2] Jeffrey Stout describes Whitman's sort of American poetry as "direct[ing] its descriptive powers at the ordinary individuals it finds in its own particular place."[3] Novelist John Updike (a Whitman disciple) also noted Whitman's project to "Address [America] and describe it to itself."[4] Such description is evident in the many lists in Whitman's poetry:

One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same
and the largest the same,
A Southerner soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant
and hospitable down by the Oconee I live,
A Yankee bound my own way ready for trade, my joints the
limberest joints on earth and the sternest joints on earth,
A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deer-skin
leggings, a Louisianian or Georgian,
A boatman over lakes or bays or along coasts, a Hoosier,
Badger, Buck-eye; (*Song of Myself* lines 334-338)

Or the list of occupations in "I Hear America Singing" – where it's worth noting that each occupation is seen as a "carol," that is, poetic.[5]

More than description, however, Whitman also, Reynolds notes, absorbed and reflected the culture of his day, from oratory to minstrel shows to Shakespearean acting.[6] His poetry does not

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[2] David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1995) 111.

[3] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004) 36.

[4] Quoted in Lev Grossman, "An Old Master in a Brave New World," *Time* June 5, 2006: 68.

[5] For poems, see Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

[6] Reynolds, Ch.6

just present America, but actually “speaks” American. Whitman might hear America singing, but he aims to also make America hear itself.

Hughes echoes this. Like Whitman, he takes on many characters in his poetry, and he does so with the aim of giving voice to those whose songs are not heard as loudly: “I, too, sing America,” he writes, but sings the song of “the darker brother” dreaming of a seat at the American table.[7] Hughes is not a list-maker like Whitman is, but he is an absorber and reflector of voices. In his case, these are African-American voices – in one scholar’s words, “the lives of the common black folk”[8] - and he includes the real slang and the real music of those voices. Here is the blues singer of "Weary Blues:”

“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”[9]

Hughes here reflects a voice – a real voice – but also reflects culture – black music, the music of the blues. If Whitman absorbed the language of the stage and lecture hall, Hughes absorbed the language of the dance-hall and the juke joint.

Hamilton likewise includes a variety of voices. Alexander Hamilton is its main character – but he is not its narrator. That task falls to the character of his “frenemy” Aaron Burr. In the opening number, in fact, narration is shared among almost all major speaking roles. “All our characters set the stage for our man’s entrance,” Lin-Manuel Miranda explains.[10] More than that, though,

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[7] Langston Hughes, “I Too” in *Vintage Hughes* (NY: Vintage, 2004) 12

[8] Onwucheka Jemie, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (NY: Columbia, 1976)

[9] *Vintage Hughes* 13

[10] *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 16.

each character sings, ala Whitman, something of their role: “I trusted him” sings the actor who plays George Washington; “I loved him,” sing the women who play Hamilton’s lovers, and so on.[11] There is an egalitarianism of voice here – men, women, mentors, foes: all are witnesses to an American story. Somewhat in the Hughes tradition, the claim is even made that Hamilton’s own voice has been ignored or suppressed: “His enemies destroyed his rep / America forgot him,” and the question is asked how much will be remembered when “America sings for” him. The entire play is thus pitched as the attempt to give voice to a man whose voice has not been heard alongside those of his peers – “every OTHER founding father’s story gets told” laments the closing number. Thus the play, by including a multitude of American voices in the service of reclaiming the equality of an American voice, continues the tradition of Whitman and Hughes’s democratic content.

Democratic method

Also essential to the democratic narrative is the involvement of the audience/readers in the process. It is not only the subject of the poems that is inclusive, but also the presentation. This, too, has roots in cultural influences. The forms both Whitman and Hughes emulated are part of what Reynolds calls “participatory culture,”[12] dissolving boundaries between genres, between high and low culture, and between performers and audiences. Talk-back is expected - shouts of approval or disapproval, debate, questions, and the like.

Both Whitman and Hughes create poetry that seems to expect a response from the reader. Whitman begins *Song of Myself* with:

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[11] The complete lyrics to the show can be found throughout *Hamilton: The Revolution*, as well as the CD booklet for the Broadway cast recording (Atlantic, 2015).

[12] Reynolds, 154-5

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

This draws in and includes the reader right away. He then proceeds to address the reader multiple other times throughout. Among what he "assumes" is a face-to-face audience; his readers/hearers cannot help but be involved in his poem. The song of Whitman's self is the song of other selves also.

Hughes also draws readers in. Not only does he include the call-and-response sounds of blues and jazz – "Take it away / *Hey, pop! / Re-bop! / Mop!/ Y-e-a-h!"* in "Dream Boogie" – but he also, like Whitman, reaches out to his readers: "I reach out my hands to you" he writes in "To You." "All you who are dreamers, too / Help me make the world anew." This is direct address, but also an invitation to poesis. What Hughes dreams, "you" shall dream, and vice-versa, just as Whitman and "you" assume alike and belong to each other.

This also is a tradition included in *Hamilton*. Like Whitman and Hughes, Miranda has absorbed a form of participatory culture: hip-hop.[13] In an obvious nod to this, cabinet debates in *Hamilton* are staged as rap battles, complete with anachronistic mics, where the debaters are judged approvingly (or not) by the other cabinet members as well as the theater audience. Thus the audience is caught up in the performance world of the play – honorary cabinet members and therefore "judges" of the verses: "Ladies and gentlemen," Washington addresses everyone, "You could have been anywhere in the world tonight, but you're here with us in New York City. Are you ready for a cabinet meeting?" At least two other numbers – "My Shot" and "You'll Be Back" – invite audience sing-alongs, with the actors actually encouragingly singing "Ev'rybody sing"

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[13] On hip-hop as "public" poetry, see Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop* (NY: BasicCivitas, 2009)

and so on. A play obviously assumes an audience more than a poem does, but these breakings of the fourth wall strongly recall Whitman's and Hughes's direct address of their readers. Miranda himself has spoken approvingly of audible audience responses to lines from the play, from cheers to curses.[14]

Additionally, *Hamilton* makes communal storytelling a theme. A repeated line in the play is originated by the character of Washington: "you have no control/ who lives, who dies, who tells your story." This hints that storytelling is itself a collective act; it is always done by others, and it involves giving up control (something Washington himself did to great acclaim both in the play and in history). This concept is the theme (and title) of the musical's closing number, wherein the varied-witnesses approach returns again, with each character relating what they remember of Hamilton. This includes his friends and enemies, but centers around his wife Eliza, who also records and tells the story of Hamilton's fellow soldiers and founders during her life. Even she, however, wonders if she has "done enough" to keep her husband's memory alive: "When my time is up/ Have I done enough? / Will they tell your story?" And "Who lives, Who dies, Who tells your story?" is the final line of the play. "Your" here has been generalized far beyond Hamilton himself, to become a wider question of inclusion and memory. It is, in many ways, the question of American history (if not history itself).

Democratic Commitment

The last element to the "democratic narrative" is the concern with the democratic process itself. For Whitman, poetry could itself be democratic. For Stout, Whitman's poetic aims were deeply related to his democratic convictions, which envisioned a cultural program "generous

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[14] E.g., *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 162, 193

enough to include the widest human area."[15] Seen through Whitman's lens, subjectivity can itself be a tradition—a democratic tradition which values the input of many members (a claim Stout echoes and elaborates in his *Democracy and Tradition*). Reynolds likewise sees Whitman's poetry as his attempt to solve the paradoxes of American life and heal the nation, which at Whitman's time was torn by partisanship and, ultimately, war.[16] For Whitman, the poet's voice, including many voices, could be an agent of "balancing"[17] national perspectives. In *Song of Myself*, Whitman writes: "I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy, / By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms." Whitman uses his poetry to affirm democracy. There is an optimism to his writing, to his dissolving of boundaries. He understands himself as part of not just poetic tradition, but American tradition: He writes in "Starting from Paumanok:

> See, projected in time
> For me, and audience interminable.
>
> With firm and regular step they wend—they never stop,
>
> Successions of men, Americanos, a hundred millions;
>
> One generation playing its part, and passing on;
>
> Another generation playing its part, and passing on in its turn,
>
> With faces turn'd sideways or backward towards me, to listen,
>
> With eyes retrospective towards me…

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[15] The phrase is Whitman's, cited in Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* 28-29.

[16] Reynolds, 112-113

[17] The word is taken from Reynolds, 119 & 146.

His role is not just to talk to the America of his own time, and describe it to itself, but to describe America to Americans throughout time. America changes – of course it must, if it is as various and energetic as Whitman presents it.

For Hughes, the work-in-progress aspect of America is darker. Hughes also has a keen sense of history, as evidenced in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and in "Negro," which each chart the experience of blacks over time in America and elsewhere. Like Whitman, he understands America as evolving. In "Let America be America Again," Hughes flips Whitman's optimism on its head: "O let America be America again – / The Land that never has been yet -- / And yet must be—the land where every man is free." America has yet to live up to its promise here. It is an ideal, unreached but reachable – and it is the work of Americans (Hughes included) to reach for it:

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

The poem evidences commitment to America even as it is honest about the violence and injustice that have made the American dream a nightmare for many of its citizens thus far. As James Baldwin reminds us, however, criticism of America is itself an American virtue. America is not static. It changes and can be changed. Poetry is one vehicle for such change.

By virtue of its setting, the changing nature of America is essential to *Hamilton*. It is about the inception of the nation, and thus about the creative act of making America: "every action's an act

of creation," "every American experiment sets a precedent," "winning is easy; governing's harder," and so on. Beyond that, however, the play contains a keen awareness, as in Whitman and Hughes, of the problems inherent in the nation's character. Independence is described as "full of contradictions," and Burr notes the "tension" growing in the new nation. It is also Burr who has the show-stopping song "The Room Where It Happens," entirely about the frustrations and strategies of the democratic process, containing lines such as "The art of the compromise / Hold your nose and close your eyes" and detailing the political negotiations necessary to pass Hamilton's financial plan. The play is plain about the fact that democracy is work, and that it is uncertain work. Washington, Burr, and Hamilton all sing about issues of history and legacy. "God help and forgive me," sings Hamilton, "I wanna build something that's gonna outlive me." While he calls America a "great unfinished symphony" he is less certain than Whitman of the eternity of the symphony's audience. *Hamilton* thus exists at a midpoint between Whitman's optimism and Hughes's skepticism.

More optimistic is the way the play embodies the changing of America through its casting. The cast of the show is deliberately racially diverse. "This is a story about America then, told by America now," Miranda has said, "and we want to eliminate any distance between a contemporary audience and this story."[18] In a way, the play creates something like the America-that-never-was imagined by Hughes. Edward Delman writes that "The primarily black and Hispanic cast reminds audiences that American history is not just the history of white people," embodying Hughes's "I, too" sentiment. The story of the founding fathers belongs to all

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[18] https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/lin-manuel-miranda-hamilton/408019/

Americans. The original cast have spoken about how much more acting in the play has helped them relate to history – a melding of selves across time of which Whitman might well approve.

"Who tells your story?" Alexander Hamilton himself might be surprised to find that question answered for him with the names of Lin-Manuel Miranda and his colleagues onstage. Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, however, might be less surprised. *Hamilton* the musical belongs to a tradition familiar to both those poets, a tradition of particularly democratic poetry with roots in the nature of America itself, and in the debates over that nature. *Hamilton* resonates with audiences for more than its energy and lyrical cleverness; it resonates for the way it continues the democratic embodiment of the American narrative. It tells our story.

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