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## **Dreaming on Imaginary Stages and Writing Imaginative Scripts: The Magical "If" Fulfilled, in "Hamilton"**

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"This is the story of America then, told by America now"

- *Hamilton* advertisement

"Is this the most revolutionary thing to happen to Broadway or the most revolutionary thing to happen to hip hop?"<sup>1</sup>

- Amir "Questlove" Thompson

### **Introduction**

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In June 2016 I was jostled awake by someone who wanted the magazine pinned under my elbow: Rolling Stone's interview with Lin-Manuel Miranda, the author and lead actor of the celebrated musical drama *Hamilton*. Inspired by the nearly 900 page Ron Chernow biography of founding father Alexander Hamilton, even Miranda may wonder why his play has become a hit as much as he wondered why the story had not already been composed as a rap anthem. Written largely in hip hop verse, the musical has inspired both passionate fans and vocal critics, and students can learn a lot from studying both responses to this verse phenomenon. While Miranda connected with the 18<sup>th</sup> century "Founding Father" enough to assign himself the leading role in an original script detailing Hamilton's life, Miranda's writing demonstrates a faith in the sense of truth that transforms American history by teaching us as much about America today as about Alexander Hamilton then. If Miranda can break from tradition and redirect American popular culture, what can his musical interpretation do to spark students' imagination?

## Rationale

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One answer to the preceding question is that students' imaginations are flexible; they transition variably in and out of their fantasies and dream worlds into where some teachers would want them: reality, as it is called. However, if "Art is the lie that makes us see the truth", then a fictional and musical retelling of one of American history's celebrities portrayed on the stage with a Puerto Rican actor and writer as the star belies the "Penumbra of Allusion" that any one of us could be the star of any one of our many fantasies, IF we could dream it so.

As a kid I was raised in part by Philadelphia's stage theaters, pursuing my mom to her night work where she hustled about busily as one of Philadelphia's few theatrical press agents, representing all seven of the professional theaters to the media and critics. All I cared about was finding an empty seat to watch each visiting production, while my father sat in the front row reviewing each production in his role as the Entertainment Editor of Philadelphia's *Inquirer* newspaper. City news reports had proclaimed Philadelphia a dying city, and if you asked traditional theatergoers they would have told you that Philadelphia nightlife was, in fact, dead. From my small perch in the nearest balcony, however, I marveled at the miracle of Peter Pan's flight to Never Neverland, became enraptured with the evolving relationship between student and teacher in *The King and I*'s exotic Siamese setting, or fell in love with Sandra Dee's dancing in *Grease*. I joined the audience each evening, be it Al Pacino's ferocious tirades in William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Geoffrey Holder's contra-bass laughter as *Daddy Goodness*, or Richard Kiley's sentimental singing of "To dream the impossible dream" in *Don Quixote*. After each play I leapt from my seat once the lights came up and raced from the enchanted world created by the actors, stage crew, and scripts to tap dance backstage between Gregory Hines and Eubie Blake following *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, find Yule Brynner his shirt as the dry ice evaporated from *The King and I*, or remove Marcel Marceau's makeup once *Bip* had finished waving imaginary stories into reality. I returned home each opening night with vinyl records to help me count off the steps to *A Chorus Line* and lend my voice to back up Ben Vereen in *The Wiz*. Even sitting politely in the audience I could participate by clapping, laughing, and quietly humming along.

While my parents left their work in the theater for other enterprises, my early start remains a lesson I can share with students at my high school, so that they, too can assume the role of a lifetime by being actors, choreographers, stage crew, directors, and scriptwriters in the manufacturing their audience's dreams. Lower Northeast Philadelphia sets the scene for my school's playful introduction to student driven theater. Roughly 50% Puerto Rican, 25% Dominican, and 25% African American, according to the 2014-2015 school report, Thomas Alva Edison High School & John C. Fareira Skills Center may have been ranked 80th of 82 high schools within the School District of Philadelphia, and 25th of 26 high schools within the designated "Turnaround Network", but we have an active after school dance troupe that performs twice yearly, a robust conga group bordering upon a dozen drummers who often remain playing in the music room after the janitors have locked the main exit doors, and a dynamic poetry team that scripts, memorizes, and performs in citywide "slam" league competitions with 23 other middle and high schools every Friday evening each spring. While I coach the poetry team in the afternoons, I also teach a poetry elective during every school day enrolled with students from every age and academy across the school except the Ninth. The Poetry class is usually filled up to or beyond the 33 student legal limit but I have adequate space in my double-wide classroom, or in the auditorium of the 1300 student school. Electives like my poetry class are either 45 or 90 minutes, and the school also offers a 9th grade Drama elective to 9th graders only, and both of us who teach these electives have a lot of freedom in how to design our curricula.

While teachers at my school are determined to increase the rigor in our instruction, as well as improve student's reading and writing skills in every class, the electives allow us a more flexible approach to do so. 25% of Edison HS's students have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) so legally they need accommodations in order to fully grasp some concepts or need appropriate scaffolding in order to accomplish a similar project as other students, and some students who attend my class have just arrived from the Dominican Republic or are Level 1 ESOL students whose Spanish may be the only language they used in Puerto Rico or at home in the United States. Still more are simply emotionally challenged by various traumatic events: a Pew Charitable Trust report some years ago indicated that at least 75% of female students had been sexually assaulted prior to entering the school and that approximately 75% of male students had witnessed a severely violent event, and of course there are crossover incidents between both groups. Edison serves one of the more poverty-stricken, violent, and drug trafficked collection of kids in the city, but from our view we as a community may be "persistently dangerous" to some statisticians but see ourselves as more normal a sample of America than many would assume: it's all most of my students know.

How can we battle rap with history and gang up on poetry? My students are fluent in the streets of Philadelphia, some with the barrios of San Juan, Puerto Rico, the ghettos of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; they are certainly acquainted with the pop-references of the proverbial radio sound chain, and yet they are handcuffed to poverty like its soundtrack is their heartbeat. My school, Edison High, sits smack dab between two graveyards and an animal kill shelter, around the corner from a juvenile detention center that sends us their graduates with two weeks left in the year, sporting the bling of ankle bracelets and their ears still ringing with the clang! clang! of jail cell bars, into a city with more kids sentenced to lifetime sentences in the juvenile justice system than any other city in the country. Twenty-five percent of my students do not live with their own parents, and a similar number are learning-disabled. Edison High School is ranked 80th out of 82 schools in the city, but believe it or not the kids are ok, because they have grit, they have resourcefulness, they have perpetual persistence and survivability. If they can graduate from Edison, they have survived the biggest challenges that life in American urban society has to offer.

In this climate, we get enough of reality; isn't it more ideal to be less than real, and go somewhere imaginary, like a book, or a land like Lilliput in *Gulliver's Travels*? I would rather my students find solace in their own mental space, interesting imaginary places in their daydreams of something impossible, then make it reality through the effort of their lifetimes...In so thinking, I see how we can cut down the tests to size in poetry; we can excerpt the excerpts like samples of a beat; riff off of the rhythms that hip hop has created, but not as content, but as the vehicle; let's make American history the subject, let stories be the challenge, and open windows to imaginary worlds. May their mental mumblings be the mystified chanting of certified shamans, and may we find solace in the pages of a book, and the spirit of the stage, and in the sprint to study history. I believe students everywhere can learn from an analysis of Puerto Rican and African American cultural production how to create their own personal framework, but I should make super clear that a critique of *Hamilton* neither rejects nor celebrates the work; perhaps, however, studying *Hamilton* helps us all learn how to analyze any dramatic or scripted work, even while the focus is upon learning to create one's own. After all, as George C. Wolfe famously voiced, "We are all up in each other's 'Other'".<sup>2</sup> Salmon Rushdie, in his loving praise of *The Wizard of Oz*, wrote that "The dreams that you dare to dream may come true", and there is, according to Professor Joe Roach at Yale University, "There is a strand of exceptionalism in American thought", and it is perhaps this exceptionalism that allows us egos that truly believe we can be the stars of the show; may all our dreams come true.

## Content Objectives

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### Constantin Stanislavski and the Magic “If”

The renowned theatrical philosopher Constantin Stanislavski wrote of a “Magic *If*” in acting that allowed the actor in a work of drama to transition as if from one world to another: “From the moment of the appearance of *If* the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life, created and imagined by him.”<sup>3</sup> If we begin to unpack the contents of *Hamilton* and examine its basis in the historical biography by Pulitzer Prize-winner Ron Chernow, or this musical’s trajectory within American popular culture, we have the potential to explore a tremendously intriguing phenomenon. As hip hop drummer Amir “Questlove” Thompson says of the play “If I can’t put my finger on it, it makes for an *itchy* finger.”<sup>4</sup> The historical basis for the play, the mythology and hype around its appearance on the American stage, and the compelling thrust of hip hop verse as the vehicle to deliver it to us makes the possibilities for my students endlessly *itchy*. The itchiness Questlove describes may come from a feeling of uncertainty in seeing a Puertorriqueno portray a white man: what if, to use the parlance of Stanislavski’s magic *If*, we could all be stars? ““But if this were real,” posits Stanislavsky, “‘how would I react? What would I do?’...And normally, naturally...this *If* acts as a lever to lift him into a world...of creativity.”<sup>5</sup> Manuel, in reading the Chernow biography, leapt into Hamilton’s shoes metaphorically, but in casting himself took an even greater and more literal leap into becoming an historical character, placing himself as an actor and as a representative of previously stereotyped and limited citizens, at the center of American history then, and American politics today.

### Deconstructing Hamilton

According to a Slate Magazine “the soul of the show is hip-hop, and there are carefully placed shout-outs to everyone from Mobb Deep and Eminem to DMX and (especially) Biggie.”<sup>6</sup> While Lin Manuel Miranda, the primary creator of *Hamilton*, used the epic and perhaps far too scholar-lite biography as his source, students will see only the modus operandi of his verse interpretation; in essence, they will see how one person’s imagination can build an entire enterprise. Miranda’s authoring of *Hamilton* the play performs a deconstruction of Ron Chernow’s highly uncritical yet perhaps scholarly text, transforming the narrative around Alexander Hamilton from a bland interpretation of one man’s role as partial author to the Constitution into an entirely new story of an orphan from the Caribbean who through his own grit and self-determination perseveres through abandonment, neglect, hardship, immigration, and ultimately the American revolutionary war into a loyal servant, gifted debater, tremendously prolific writer, to become a romantic leader of the effort to invent a new identity for the nation that transferred power from merely a “New England” into the much more dynamic and yet infant “United States of America”. According to one critical definition,

Deconstruction is not synonymous with “destruction”, however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word ‘analysis’ itself, which etymologically means “to undo” – a virtual synonym for “to de-construct”...If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the

specificity of a text's critical difference from itself.<sup>7</sup>

While students in this unit can choose short historical texts to transform, narrate, set to music, rhyme to their own beats, and write in each script a new version with themselves in the leading role, throughout the process of invention and reinvention students can also harness the power of methodical postmodern deconstruction as a process much more than any historical revisionism of which some have claimed Lin-Manuel is guilty. *If* Deconstruction can perhaps best be described (by Paul de Man) as “a theory of reading which aims to undermine the logic of opposition within texts”<sup>8</sup>, then Miranda is indeed making a heroic effort towards a genuine revolution in scripting the play in hip hop verse.

Just as authoring this dramatic work is akin to Miranda pirating an 18<sup>th</sup> century slave ship (my own metaphor) he commits a metaphorical mutiny in order to captain American theater’s stalled vessel onward and into new adventures as *if* to set free a ship that seemed anchored to white, Anglo-, male authorship. Students participating in this unit can rewrite the story of any consequential historical events they choose, as a means of carrying the expressive theatrical maritime vehicle similarly to how Manuel Miranda does so in a kind of ironic, karmic metaphor, by deconstructing the barge piece by piece even further once they’ve kidnapped it to their own shores of creativity. As a process to owning the means of theatrical production, students can rebuild each subject they choose into in an entertaining and creative narration, perhaps altering entirely every frame of reference they might find within the original source. Students will essentially become master craftsmen in the arts of slave ship de-construction, as well as in the art of construction, in order to “Use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house”.<sup>9</sup>

Some significant academicians challenge the conceptual framework that embodies deconstruction, such as Audre Lorde’s famous concerted advice when she writes:

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.<sup>10</sup>

Lin Manuel’s play cannot entirely dismantle the “Master’s House”; in fact, he seems to flatter the American stage with his idolatry of it. Nonetheless, placing himself at the center of a tale celebrated by conservative politicians as much as by liberals seems to stretch towards a kind of worship that may actually border on narcissism. Some critics have claimed this is pure “braggadocio”, as if hip hop is purely an effort at self-aggrandizement, and not a socio-political stance that Chuck D once famously called the “CNN of the streets”. Nonetheless, Amir “Questlove” Thompson, the show’s producer has said that

“When I talk to Lin, or when I sit in the presence of the thing he has made, I feel the spirit

of hip-hop. He wants the clockwork exposed so everyone can see what time it is. Without straining yourself, you can see all the way down to the idea. Hip-hop and Broadway have met now, and shaken hands, and both have walked away elevated.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Personal, the Political, and the “Paracosmic”**

I believe that students must learn to meld the personal and the political, for just as they are affected by political events in uniquely personal and *microcosmic* ways, they must learn to make their often personal responses into concrete critical expressions broad enough to apply to the larger *macrocosm* of society.<sup>12</sup> Above all else, young students most need to feel empowered, whether they are in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, middle school, or about to graduate. Empowerment implies building confidence, self-esteem, and student voice, ultimately supporting each person’s growth into a fully realized adult. Stanislavski writes of “True Acting”:

One cannot always create subconsciously and with great inspiration. No such genius exists in the world. Therefore, our art teaches us first of all to create consciously, because that will prepare the way for the blossoming of the sub, which is inspiration. The more you have of conscious creative moments in your role the more chance you will have of a flow of inspiration.<sup>13</sup>

In this spirit, a better result for the effort of writing and starring in one’s own script, as Lin-Manuel Miranda does with *Hamilton*, is the notion of “Paracosm”: an imaginary world created to deal with some trauma. If we know anything about the students in my school, it is that they are carrying around with them a lot of trauma baggage that might best be alleviated through intensive modes of therapy, more than any standardized tests the way they have been designed traditionally. Many of them have sublimated their feelings of loss in favor of anger, fearfulness, or depression, akin to the paradigm that people address traumatic experiences with three potential responses: (1) fight (2) flight, or (3) freeze. The paracosmic response can be encouraged as a twofold means of addressing the trauma patiently, while helping the student to become “Trauma Aware”, as well as stimulating a desire by the student to fully engage with their own work, resulting in educational commitment, improved skills, and those higher test scores that everyone seems to worship.

### **Puerto Rican Identity Politics**

Many older theatergoers have expressed concern that classic American musical drama has lost inspiration and is drying up like a drought has laid waste where there were once great lakes. Because newer generations had seemed not to appreciate, attend, or even display an appetite to consume the preceding cultural highlights of earlier generations, whose soundtracks for shows as diverse as *West Side Story* back in 1955\* and *Rent* in 1996 had been equally chart-topping and successful with fans of pop music as with theatergoers. With so much to entertain the mass of consumers, most people are distracted away from even sitting still long enough to see a show, exacerbated by an explosion in social media entertainment and mass marketing. Taking for granted that there are so many people producing entertainment for American consumers today, and add to

that the fact that producers aspire to mass global markets as much as our provincial appetites, and stage theaters assumed it was losing its audience to oblivion. As one writer speaks to the issue of audience in the Puerto Rican community,

Our attempts to value ourselves as Puerto Ricans have so frequently been staged through spectacles to offset shame...modern Puerto Rican ethnic and national identity has been historically narrated or performed by tropes of shame and displays of pride.<sup>14</sup>

Even to see how Jennifer Lopez and Miranda collaborated on a positive public tribute album to the victims and families of a terrorist attack in Orlando, Florida, contrasted with a book called *Latino/a Popular Culture* that devoted an entire chapter to a critical discussion of Jennifer Lopez's posterior; if we limit Latinos' media coverage and celebrate only a single part of the body, do we also limit their very sense of identity? Lin-Manuel Miranda, in considering this claim, looked at his own play and asked if it were a Puerto Rican musical? Born in 1980, Miranda is nonetheless sure to be aware of Puerto Rican activism in the 1970s, including the omnipresent popular slogan "Despierta boriqua, defiende lo tuyo" or "Wake up, boriqua, defend what is yours", and his play has certainly served to defend the honor of Puerto Ricans in the popular imagination.

Just as the culture producers and performers that includes actors, artists, writers, directors, and musicians are needed to make the vision of positive Puerto Rican identity a reality, so too are consumers of culture needed as an audience in front of aspiring celebrities to elevate the level of tension and increase the cultural adrenaline that transforms an actor into a star and a group of them into an experience you will never forget. Frances Negron-Muntaner writes

I aim to call attention to the ways Puerto Ricans are hailed and imagine themselves as a 'people,' understood alternately as an "ethnicity" (defined by a specific culture across national-state boundaries) and a "nationality" (defined in a relationship to a specific territory, with full or partial claims to independent sovereignty).<sup>15</sup>

Towards the end of this unit of study every student will read each script and select one with carefully constructed persuasive written reviews as a grand contest, in order to interpret and perform the script in a whole-class production.

...though hip hop is a vernacular culture shared by New York Latinos and African Americans, in the case of the former their participation is often presumed to be a defection from Latinidad into the African American camp. Nothing could be further from the truth.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the scripts my students write may be in Spanish, some may be in slang, but I want to find its verse,



even in dialogue. Going deeper, it is important to me that my students leave class feeling as though they have completed a project of great import, relevance, and scope, and this will give them some choice in the matter. They will seek out and find a text which they can own, promote, and expand upon. By its culmination, their end product should be substantial and worthy of all the effort Miranda put into his own production. We will do it *together* !Juntos!

### **Melodrama: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly in Racial Casting**

Melodrama, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, is a work (as in a movie or a play) “characterized by extravagant theatricality and by the predominance of plot and physical action over characterization”.<sup>17</sup> At first glance there is in this model a stark contrast between hero and villain; in *Hamilton*, the protagonist Alexander Hamilton is portrayed (at least for a time) by the play’s creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, a Puerto Rican, and Aaron Burr, the antagonist, is cast as an African American. The musical, is nonetheless described by the NY Times as going to great pains to reveal a plot beyond race; one essentially important question to ask is if it in fact succeeds in doing so.

The primary debates between Hamilton and Jefferson are thus between an African American and Latino in rap battle form; the characters, while articulating phraseology with the greatest of ease, in grand theatrical style, appear to represent an authentic historical moment, as much as a Broadway script can move towards doing so, but perhaps they reveal the characters’ dynamic relationship better to a popular audience than an historical text? The fundamental polarity was not lost on the actors, and in the effort to represent the way they are pitted against one another, with Latinos winning the battle, is as much like an idealized revision of Roberto Duran and Sugar Ray Leonard’s 1980s boxing ring confrontations as it is a fantasy dream world in which King George at the top was not only the white, male God, but as a flawed monarch, instead of benevolent dictator. Yet it ends with the tragedy of Hamilton’s death by duel foreshadowed early in the play.

Why did Miranda connect so immediately with Chernow’s story of Hamilton? Did the immigration story that spoke to his own family’s migration from the islands to New York? In part, according to the evidence found in interviews with Miranda. He claims it was immediately apparent to him that Alexander Hamilton’s life was an example of the archetypal immigrant narrative of leaving home for the big city, born out in the biography by the evidential truth of his journey from St. Croix in the Caribbean and traveling North all the way to New York after finding he had been disowned by his father, his mother a secondary woman in the man’s life. In the textbook of the play, a tomb written and copyrighted to Lin-Manuel himself, p.15 indicates that on opening night

...Lin reintroduced people to the poor kid from the Caribbean who made the country rich and strong, an immigrant who came here to build a life for himself and ended up helping to build the nation.

It goes on to say:

He is the prototype for millions of men and women who followed him, and continue to arrive today...that 13% of the population is foreign-born, which is near an all-time high;



that one day soon, there will no longer be majority and minority races, only a vibrant mix of colors.

And most importantly: “Or, you could look around the Eats room that night and consider what made it possible.”<sup>18</sup>

Was it the musicality of the language in Chernow’s text, gripping him in the throes of its internal prose beat? Partly again, indicates the creator, at the beginning. Finally, was it the historical context that captured his imagination? Without a doubt. In examining *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, in reviewing the Jabberwocky of *Alice in Wonderland*, and combining these texts with *Winnie the Pooh* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I am struck by the way *Hamilton*, through hip hop forms and a stage, takes us through a make-believe world in which we suspend disbelief and allow everyday description to rhyme, the music to kick in and carry us to where we’ve never been, the costumes to front for the armor we wear in every walk of life, but with a wool hat or a thinking cap, we see how, even from the world of today, we are all there.

How to explore this paradigm with students? How to reveal deeper threads and an imaginary world in the lands of “La Isla Bonita”, as *Madonna* once called the Puerto Rican world in New York City in those same 1980s? Furthermore, how can teachers learn from their own students and bridge the divide between teacher and student, adult and teen, in order to be granted safe passage into their lives? As a teacher, don’t we desire as much that our students access the land of make-believe on the stage, as much as into its concrete American history? The primary text for this unit is the play *Hamilton*, but as ancillary supports this unit I recommend excerpts of *Boriquas*, anthology of Puerto Rican writings, including *Being Puerto Rican*, by Lorrin Thomas. We begin, in fact, with ourselves in our own time, but like *Alice in Wonderland* heading down the rabbit hole, or the kids passing through a wardrobe into Narnia by C.S. Lewis’ pen, these songs lead us all into an imaginary world of the past, like Dorothy’s in *The Wizard of Oz* when she loses consciousness in a Kansas storm and wakes up somewhere far, far, away, bringing her to those ruby red slippers (or in the book by L. Frank Baum, silver) that if she clicked them together will bring her back home. Students in this unit of study, following these practices, may in fact, find themselves in that imaginary land they create, and for once they can assign themselves the starring role.

## Conclusion

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In order to fully explore the play and prepare both teachers and students for the push to perform a close reading of the songs, both inside *Hamilton* the play and from outside in the songs that inspired his work, President Barack Obama said in an introduction to the Tony Awards that *Hamilton* is “A civics lesson our kids cannot get enough of” as well as that the musical is full of “fierce, youthful energy; one where rap is the language of revolution and hip hop its urgent soundtrack”, (Michelle Obama) “It is a musical about the miracle that is America, a place of citizenship, where we debate our ideas with passion and conviction”. Students will take hold of history in new ways, so as to retell it with a fresh voice, with a bachata beat, perhaps, and in so doing refashion every reader or audience member’s perception of who is at the center of the political discourse, and who plays the starring role in if not the historical record, the present moment.

*The show must go on!*

- Anonymous

## Strategies

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### 7 Step Lesson Plan

I don't believe I need to do more than list the strategies of a 7 Step Lesson Plan for readers of this unit, so here they are as a reminder: "Do Now" as a warmup that leads into the larger project of work, "Direct Instruction" to demonstrate a method or lesson, followed by "Guided Practice" in order to support students attempting to learn how to comprehend the material or method(s), and "Independent Practice" in which students work out the process on their own in more depth. Ultimately, students reflect upon and reiterate the lesson in check-in of sorts I've been taught to call a brief "Review" in order for me as the teacher to remediate any misperceptions, re-enforce in the affirmative any accurate realizations, discoveries, and "Aha!" moments, however I enjoy using it as an opportunity to also have students share out and show off, even to present and teach the class themselves (depending upon the length of the class period---I typically have 90 minute periods...) and then I follow the review with a "Summative Assessment" in which to collect and evaluate for the last time what we have accomplished as a group. During the summative assessment I might be able to gather enough information to support or lead my students into another activity the next time, spinning off of the work we did, and in fact we are in this unit dependent upon such a daily assessment in order to fully pace ourselves, plot out the direction of the work we do, as well as engage ourselves in the effort that will yield a satisfying and rousing response from an audience of peers.

### Peer Coaching/Editing

Throughout the activities to come in this unit, students will select roles according to their interests and talents, as well as learn about these "jobs", of a sort, in order to both acquire and enhance the ability to achieve a sense of progress through process in forward motion, but also to "Learn the rules in order to break the rules".

If Hamilton is a musical, theatrical production, then a classroom can provide the stage and lighting for a marvelous play of its own. While the classroom becomes a theater naturally, a teacher's job is to be a Creator, not necessarily the Director: that role might be played by the gathered students. After all, they could always stage a revolt if they don't like you very much; it is important to give them a sense of shared ownership of the project(s) you are to create together, so that they are invested in seeing it through to a successful end. Though a lot can be learned from failures, and students will and should reflect upon the conversation between theory and practice throughout any class work, in my classroom instruction I tend to gear all of my energy towards a positive *experience* for everyone as a whole.

### Collaborative Production

The methods for putting on a theatrical production could fill an entire book, and have filled many, so I cannot in all reasonableness go into it in summary here, but I will say that it should involve (and I mean that word in

all its best connotations) EVERYONE in the class. Even if someone's only role is to hand out programs, though perhaps they could be encouraged to do more, that is the role they should own. That being said, there are countless roles in the making of a theatrical production, such as: Director, Choreographer, Actors, Costume Designer(s), Musical Accompaniment, Lighting, Stage Crew, Set Painter(s), and Advertising. In addition to these, there could be others, but I will suggest that everyone should touch stage at some point, even if only to walk across as a supporting character. I believe that every student should be given that honor, responsibility, and ownership, so that we all feel equally invested in the production.

## Activities

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### Opening Day

Based upon the work we will be doing as a class, the first day is going to be a set of explanations and brainstorming: First, explaining that we will be writing scripts to be used for a dramatic production of an historical event, or better yet narratives that will be set to stage to tell historical events in modern language and verse. Second, brainstorming some of the essential events of American history, i.e.: the civil war, the depression, the civil rights era, etc., depending upon which events seem most prescient in the minds of students. Within each general period, however, are a myriad of momentary tales. For instance, we could design an entire script around a lunch counter experience during the civil rights era. Another way to do this activity of brainstorming would be to consult with a social studies teacher in the school to see what events s/he has focused upon or would like to. Another still would be to peruse the textbook students are using with them as a means of identifying a timeline of significant occurrences in the American historical record. Students can spend time arguing and debating the relevance of each event, as well as identifying the merits of any event: what classifies an event as having historical significance? From whose perspective is the story told? Are there contrary views of that same event? Class will end with students spending the night choosing (by our next meeting) one of the events to retell.

### Alternative Content

If I were to have my way, and I suspect I might, then as an alternative to American history, and particularly because I have a lot of students who know their way around Puerto Rican history, the history of the Dominican Republic, and several other places on the planet, students could choose any event that has significance to themselves and their culture, and instead write verse to tell that tale. In fact, so long as it follows the same process of using the narrative structure below as a guide, I can imagine allowing level 1 to even level 3 English Language Learners to write in their native language. It might be fun to have certain students attempt to translate the work into English, accommodating the poetic twists and turns.

### Second Lesson

Once students have selected an event, it may help them to identify a traditional narrative structure, called "Freytag's Pyramid". While there are many variations on the plot diagram, students should keep it in mind even as they seek to find alternatives to it. This simple pyramid, or triangle, should be like an outline that provides a framework for the narrative students will create around a historical event; we are, in essence, attempting to make stories from events, narratives in verse from the plot of an event. While students will spend a significant amount of time in this second part of the work on identifying the key exposition,

complication, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution, students should balance that work with an exploration of character: who is at the center of the story? I recommend stories are written autobiographically, but who is the narrator? The survivor? The winner? The loser? “Voice” becomes the essential lesson.

### **Third Lesson**

Now that students have identified the event, plot, and structure of what they will tell, they will need to establish a poetic style. For this I recommend students listen to their favorite music, as they always will, but now with a keen ear towards finding a rhythm that lends itself to a rewriting, a retelling in the context of historical events. This process can begin in as simple a way as to rewrite the song telling of the historical event, or by stealing the song for inspiration in order to write a new one. The most famous thief in this vein has been “Weird Al Yankovic”, whose spoofs of contemporary hits like “Beat It” by Michael Jackson (transformed into “Eat It”) can be a lot of fun to play for them from YouTube. Alternatively, students can pick instrumental music and write their own lyrics, if they are gifted in this way, and create lyrics by their own method(s). A third and most creative method is if they feel a song emerge from their own imagination. Students could even work together at this, forming teams of two or more in order to script an entire play that hopes to tell the tale from multiple perspectives. In writing the verse they can focus upon the “voice” of the character at play, but also upon technique, using traditional poetry methods such as rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and onomatopoeia, but above all else rhythm, be it from their own breath or the beat of an external force.

### **Fourth Lesson**

The fourth phase of production can emphasize revision: checking for accuracy in facts, or at least maintenance of the spirit of the event(s) and the voice(s) of the character(s), as well as the flow, grammar, internal cohesion of the piece, as well as how it might fit into the larger context of a complete play, or on some level the complete narrative of American history. One question the teacher might ask at this point is about group cohesion: if everyone has been working on a script independently, for however many days, how can we gather together as a whole class and present our work in such a way that will allow for each student to feel validated for their efforts and supported in further development if such development is warranted? My solution to this is to have a public critique (and let them know beforehand that their work will be made public, or that in the very least it will be made visible to the other students in class, so as (1) to prevent any embarrassing content from being written into the script, and (2) to elevate the level of writing so that students, who are naturally hardwired to see competition in the work they do, push themselves just a little bit harder to impress each other). I like to do these once everyone is nearly done (deadlines are key here...) by asking each kid to present their work with a short explanation. These presentations should be as low stress as possible (otherwise some kids can get really worked up about them, but this is something they need to learn to *do* in poetry class). If you want to go whole hog, I recommend you use this as an opportunity to review the rubric you began with in the brainstorming activities on “Opening Day”: How is the event historically relevant? In addition to this criteria, students should now ask if the writing satisfies an expectation of voice: Does the style of the writing parallel the character’s intentions, motivations, and personality (also known as “Tone”)? Finally, the style: Does the style have any highlights and or methodological flaws? Where? How? Does it need more/less, and in what way? Students can award prizes to some that stand out to them, or at the very minimum can write literary critiques and appraisals that speak, with all respect, towards the merits of the piece.

## Fifth Lesson

The fifth and final act in the play of this unit is a theatrical production. While this is in no way a requirement for the teacher in any class, be it English, Poetry, Social Studies or even Drama, I highly recommend it if only for the group process. It can be an overwhelming process, too, and an undertaking of not some little time and energy it can be even more than overwhelming! It could be disastrous! But it could also be a lot of fun for the participants as well as for the audience. Despite the potential life-sapping risks of assuming the reins of a theatrical production with high school students, once they have somehow committed to the various roles of the thing that is to be made, and perhaps they will present a short or fully developed production, the goal I emphasize is that if everyone participates it is a success. Just ask Lin Manuel Miranda!

## Appendices/PA Common Core State Standards

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Standard - CC.1.2.11-12.C

Analyze the interaction and development of a complex set of ideas, sequence of events, or specific individuals over the course of the text.

Standard - CC.1.4.11-12.T

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Standard - CC.1.4.11-12.V

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Standard - CC.1.5.11-12.E

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks.

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## Endnotes

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