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"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?" Alexander Hamilton after the End of History

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The closing number in Lin-Manuel Miranda's blockbuster musical about first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?" reflects on the great man's historical legacy. It charges that the "ten-dollar founding father" remains a relatively neglected historical figure; unlike Washington, Jefferson, Adams and Franklin, Hamilton had neither the opportunity to grow old nor to have his story told to the American people, despite the efforts of his devoted wife Eliza to keep his legacy alive.[1] Eliza Hamilton's love no doubt drove her desire to commemorate Alexander but the reasons for Miranda's own attempt to revive Hamilton's legacy are rather more complex and opaque. Hamilton's story appeals to Miranda as much for autobiographical as for historical reasons, the two men sharing humble origins in the Caribbean and making good in the US through the power of their pens.[2] Yet, his musical intervention had a tangible impact on the national commemoration of Hamilton, including keeping his face on the ten-dollar bill.[3] Miranda's *Hamilton* has enjoyed massive critical and commercial success, garnering armfuls of industry awards and large numbers of ten-dollar bills for its creator. The show's off-Broadway debut sold out, advance tickets for its Broadway opening totalled 30 million dollars and the show went on to play in Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., London, Puerto Rico and on tour, with plans for productions in Hamburg and Sydney. In 2016 alone, *Hamilton* won 11 Tony awards, a Grammy, the Pulitzer prize for drama as well as breaking box office records. To coincide with 4th of July celebrations in 2020, the Disney+ channel launched a live stage film version with a 75 million-dollar distribution package. In its first ten days, 2.7 million households streamed the televised show. The name of Alexander Hamilton, it is safe to say, is no longer unknown.

Alexander Hamilton's name has, of course, always been familiar to historians of the revolutionary era and early republic.[4] Born on the island of Nevis in the British West Indies, Hamilton arrived in New York as a young man in 1772, just in time to join the revolutionary cause. His skill with both pen and

[1] Lin Manuel-Miranda, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story," *Hamilton: An American Musical* track 23, disc 2 *(Original Broadway Cast Recording,* 2015).
[2] Miranda is a second-generation immigrant, the son of Puerto Rican parents.
[3] The 2015 decision to replace Hamilton with an unnamed American woman was reversed in 2016, due to the surging popularity of *Hamilton* the musical. See Scott L. Montgomery, "What Really Kept Alexander Hamilton on the $10 Bill" *Fortune Magazine* (24 April, 2016) https://fortune.com/2016/04/24/alexander-hamilton-harriet-tubman/ [accessed 30 December 2019]
[4] For a historiographical survey of Hamilton's historical reputation and a strong attempt to restore its positive features, see Stephen Knott, *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

sword soon brought him to the notice of General George Washington, who employed him as an aide-de-camp during the revolutionary war and as his treasury secretary afterward. Alongside John Jay and James Madison, Hamilton co-authored *The Federalist Papers*, making the legal and political case that ultimately secured the adoption of the new US Constitution. At the treasury, his forensic legal brain and keen financial strategizing facilitated continued state-building. He put forward plans to assume state debts and fund national debt alongside the establishment of the first national Bank and aided the creation of the United States Coastguard and Post Office Department. Hamilton's vision for a federalist future included the stimulation of manufacturing, which put him in direct opposition to his cabinet colleague at the State Department; Thomas Jefferson opposed debts, banks and the growth of industry in favour of a future republic of yeomen farmers, each "standing foursquare on his own plot of land, gun in hand and virtue in heart."[5] The clashing political visions of the two men coalesced into the first party system, with Hamilton defining the Federalist platform and Jefferson the Republican.[6]

Since being paired in the first US administration, the two men's fortunes continued to be tied to one another historiographically across the generations.[7] For most of the nineteenth century, Hamilton's elitist plutocrat seeking close-to monarchical control at the centre of the American state, invariably lost out in the history books to Jefferson's heroic radical democrat who penned the Declaration of Independence and supported the French Revolution. As Michael O'Malley notes, "Until recently, Alexander Hamilton was a hero mostly to bankers."[8] Yet, as issues of race and slavery and their connection to the protections of states' rights came to the fore in both history and history-writing in the twentieth century, Hamilton's star began to rise relative to that of slave-owning Jefferson. That star shines brightly in Miranda's musical, with Hamilton transformed into a freedom-fighting abolitionist and Jefferson into a privileged dandy who profits from unfree labour and "gets high with the French."[9] In fact, Hamilton's legacy is largely one of supporting the centralisation of power in both government and economy, while Jefferson's republicanism offers enduring political support for individualism and states' rights. George Will notes that while Jefferson is memorialised in Washington, Hamilton's monument is all around, "We honour Jefferson, but live in Hamilton's country, a mighty

[5] Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virgina* (New York: W.W. Nortonn & Co., 1975): 377.
[6] The best account of the politics of the 1790s remains Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism* (Oxford University Press; New Ed edition, 1995).
[7] A useful survey of the historiographical fortunes of the founding fathers is R.B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); see also Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth*: *The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1978); Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).
[8] Michael O' Malley, "The Ten-Dollar Founding Father: Hamilton, Money and Federal Power" in Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter (eds.) *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America's Past* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018): 119.
[9] Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Cabinet Battle #1," *Hamilton*, track 2, disc 2 (2015).

industrial nation with a strong central government."[10] Miranda's play celebrates not just Alexander as a founding father but the nation, Hamilton's America.

The Life and Death of the Past

This essay is not primarily interested in the story that Miranda's musical tells about the founding or the creation of a newly minted image for one half-forgotten founding father. Rather, it explores what *Hamilton* shows us about the nature of history itself and the relationship between history, memory and art – or between truth and fiction – and how the musical has played a role in the re-forging of that relationship. It examines the expanding status of popular fictional portrayals of historical events in the context of steadily declining interest in academic history.[11] It does not offer a guide on how to make academic history more popular, but it does try to understand how and why this unhappy disconnect arose. Tracing changes in the writing of history about the revolution, alongside accompanying transformations in public culture, the essay seeks to illuminate the impact that blurring the lines between truth and fiction has had on both sides of the equation.

Historical myths and storytelling about the past existed long before the historical profession emerged in the nineteenth century and have continued to spill out from beneath the discipline of professional scrutiny and scholarly rigor into public cultural spaces since. Over the last half century, however, the relationship between history and the public has been transformed in two important ways. On the one hand, "history" has become increasingly popular and public; on the other, it has become politicised, a firm feature of the ongoing, divisive culture wars. In historical novels and plays; in the proliferation of heritage sites; and in television series and Hollywood movies, not only is story-telling about the past ubiquitous but its import and urgency is on the rise.[12] Individuals, families, and communities look to locate their cultural identities and historical roots in a shared past. From the 1970s, the search for identity has played out in a massive expansion of genealogical interest in the form of TV shows, heritage tourism, websites such as Ancestry and dramatic fiction. The 1977 TV adaptation of Alex

[10] George Will quoted in Knott, *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth*, 6.
[11] In US universities, the study of history has been declining more rapidly than any other major, despite the number of registered students rising. See Benjamin Schmidt, "The History BA Since the Great Recession: 2018 AHA Majors Report" Perspectives on History (26 November, 2018): https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report [accessed 12 November 2019]. While university departments are holding steady in the UK, fewer school students are taking History at A Level. See The British Academy, "Worrying decline in study of History and English at A Level, warns British Academy" (17 Aug, 2017) https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/worrying-decline-study-history-and-english-level-warns-british-academy/ [accessed 19 October 2020]; Reality Check Team, "A Levels: What Subjects are Students Dropping and Why?" BBC News https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45171371 [accessed 19 October 2020]
[12] From *Wolf Hall* to *Twelve Years a Slave*, historical fiction in novels and film has grown incredibly popular. The American founding shares in this uptick in fictional accounts not only with *Hamilton* but offerings such as the HBO miniseries *John Addams* and Jeff Shaara's bestselling novels *Rise to Rebellion* (New York: Ballantine Books Inc., 2001) and *The Glorious Cause* (New York: Ballantine *Books, 2002).*

Haley's *Roots* garnered a mass audience, indicating the early stirrings of a new public interest in both identity and genealogy that transformed the uses of the past as it expanded its audience.[13]

To connect with this new audience, professional historians sought ways to apply their tools outside of academia; launching the first issue of *The Public Historian* in 1978, editor Wesley Johnson noted that the time was ripe for historians who had "retreated into the proverbial ivory tower" to break out of their isolation.[14] Responding to the apparently contradictory trends of an expansion of public interest in the past and declining levels of historical knowledge among the public, historians sought to bridge the gap.[15] Louis R. Harlan's 1989 presidential address to the American Historical Association encouraged historians to take a more active role in keeping history alive in the public mind, noting the relative success of "museum exhibitors, park rangers, historical filmmakers, and popular historians like Barbara Tuchman and David McCullough" and the obvious failures of "out of touch" academic historians in doing so.[16] Harlan's view was not universally held but it was broadly accepted and the new field of 'public history' quickly became institutionalised in journals, conferences, degree programmes and academic posts. The foremost criticisms of Harlan's diagnosis came from those who misread growing public enthusiasm for the past as evidence of widespread knowledge or understanding of history.[17] As Michael Kammen notes, "American attendance at historic sites and museums is exceedingly high, and yet American performance is pathetic on an array of exams given to adults and high-school students who have had several years of American history classes."[18] To be sure, *Hamilton*'s immense popularity cannot be seen as an indication that its audiences are well-versed

[13] More than 99 million Americans tuned into the finale of *Roots,* which remains the second most-watched TV episode in broadcasting history. "Finale Of M*A*S*H Draws Record Number of Viewers," *The New York Times*, 3 March 1983: C17. The highly successful genealogical TV show "Who Do You Think You Are?" airs in UK and US versions and regularly has an audience of over 6 million. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007t575; British historian David Olusoga took a similarly genealogical approach to houses, replacing bloodlines with bricks and mortar in his "A House Through Time," now in its fourth season. Indeed, Olusoga's appointment as Professor of Public History at the University of Manchester challenges the division between public and academic history and reverses the usual direction of travel: from the entertainment industry into academic life rather than vice versa. See https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/david-olusoga-obe/

[14] Wesley G. Johnson, "Editor's Preface." *The Public Historian* 1. 1 (1978): 6; see also Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects," *The Public Historian* 1.1 (1978): 16-28. The growing interest in the role of history in public was also reflected in the *Radical History Review's* publication *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) edited by Susan Porter Benson, Roy Rosenzweig and Stephen Brier.

[15] Although jeremiads like Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York, 1987) and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990) had a conservative political agenda attached, they also carried clear empirical evidence of a decline in historical knowledge among young Americans.

[16] Louis R. Harlan, "The Future of the American Historical Association," *American Historical Review* 95 (February 1990): 1-8.

[17] Approaches to the study of the past designated less elitist (and certainly more relativistic) tended to confuse public enthusiasm for the past with knowledge about it. See especially Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

[18] Michael Kammen, "Carl Becker Redivivus: Or, Is Everyone Really a Historian?" *History and Theory* 39.2 (2000):233.

in the events or meaning of American independence, either before or after watching the show. Public interest in the past is large and growing but it is not largely informed by critical academic historians.

The second important way the relationship between history and the public has been transformed is by the emergence of an increasingly belligerent battle over the meaning of history that forms part of a broader "culture wars" in the public square, reflecting, exaggerating and reifying a fetishized version of social and political division in American life.[19] While public uses of that most nationalist of historical themes, the American Revolution, have traditionally worked to cohere and unite Americans around a common set of values, recent deployment of the nation's founding moment has, ironically, proven incredibly divisive. The "history wars" over the founding are played out through public controversies over flags, statues, exhibitions and public monuments but have also become increasingly bitter among and between professional historians. In her unsympathetic account of the Tea Party movement, Jill Lepore draws up the battle lines, as well as unwittingly exposing the division between academic and popular history. Lepore's *The Whites of Their Eyes* polemicises against conservative uses of the American founding that emphasise tradition, continuity and national unity and deploys them for political purposes in public. Gordon Wood's negative review of her book rebukes Lepore for, among other things, mocking the American public and reminds her that while critical history plays an important role in busting myths, it can (and does) exist alongside other imagined pasts and community memories that serve other, less scholarly, purposes. The Lepore-Wood spat caused quite a stir among historians of the Revolution with each camp accusing the other of escalating presentism.[20]

Historian's concerns about the gap between their professional practice and public audiences is not new, yet the acceptance of greater levels of presentism is undoubtedly a consequence of the way historians have worked to bridge that gap since the 1970s.[21] The demands of the present ring loudly in an era undergoing what philosopher Francois Hartog calls "a break in time," when the present looms large over both past and future. Hartog's regimes of historicity are useful conceptual tools to help understand how, as he puts it, "the present became something immense, invasive, and omnipresent, blocking out any other viewpoint, fabricating on a daily basis the past and the future it needed."[22]

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[19] The culture wars line up religious and conservative forces against liberal secular and progressive ones. They were first demarcated by James Davison Hunter in his *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) and are chronicled by Andrew Hartman in *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[20] Jill Lepore, *The Whites of their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010); Gordon Wood, "No Thanks for the Memories" *The New York Review of Books* (13 Jan, 2011); for a taste of the controversy surrounding the book and its review see David Sehat, "Wood on Lepore on presentism or, why Gordon Wood thinks Jill Lepore is an academic snob." *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, S-USIH (11 Jan. 2011) and the online responses. It is curious and not a little worrying that the majority of responses are critical of Wood and supportive of Lepore, despite most commenters admitting to not having read her book.

[21] Ian Tyrell's *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005) traces the many ways that U.S. historians sought to bridge the gap before the "crisis" of the 1970s emerged.

[22] Francois Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): 185.

Temporal strains felt since the 1970s finally gave way to Francis Fukuyama's announcement of the "end of history" in 1989, setting the stage for revivals of the past that have very little to do with history.[23] The consequent politicization of history and historicization of politics that has become a feature of American public culture, and can be read specifically through Miranda's musical story about the American founding, demands some critical attention.

Indeed, the surrender of the past to the demands of the present need not infect historians, but the growing disorientation among academic historians about their role and place vis-à-vis public presentations of the past makes this an important conversation to have. The discussion is ongoing; a half-century ago, J. H. Plumb's 1969 book *The Death of the Past* tolled a bell for the past as a source of authority in the present. No longer did the past provide a steady supply of heroes, Plumb notes, and neither did it act as a legitimizing font of knowledge, wisdom, tradition and ideological coherence.[24] Reporting at the end of a decade of dramatic change and far-reaching movements for liberation, Plumb reminds us that while loosening the hold of the past on the present might indeed be something to celebrate, the past also previously operated as a signpost to the future. Without that signpost, the future, along with the past, is lost.[25]

Philosophically minded historians have often commented on the relationship forged between past, present and future in the writing of history. E. H. Carr noted in his classic *What is History*? that "Good historians, whether they think about it or not, have the future in their bones."[26] Similarly, Peter Novick's vast survey of American historiography points to a connection between a commitment to historical truth and a shared belief in progress among professional historians. He dates the collapse in nationalistic versions of the American founding much earlier – to Charles Beard's 1913 *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution* – but notes that the Progressive school to which Beard belonged retained a belief in progress despite the profound shockwaves the First World War sent reverberating through Western intellectual certainties. Nevertheless, Progressive historians dispensed with the conservative and nationalistic pieties of their profession and adopted a relativist and presentist interpretation of the Revolution. Historical thinking, Carl Becker asserted, "was useful in getting the world's work more effectively done."[27] Beard and Becker both introduced social conflict

[23] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* No. 16 (Summer 1989)" 3-18.
[24] J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1969): 41, 53, 57.
[25] The West's Judeo-Christian traditions and the Enlightenment's embrace of progress all tended to move history forward toward an inevitable future. What that future looked like took a variety of forms, from liberal Whig history through Hegelian and Darwinian configurations to nationalist, socialist and Marxist versions, but "the past was still in the service of the future, and its guide." Plumb, *The Death of the Past,* 98.
[26] E. H. Carr, *What is History* 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990): 108.
[27] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 96-98; Ellen Fitzpatrick also notes the critical nature of Beard's work yet its retention of idealism and faith in progress in her *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880-1980* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002): 54; Carl Becker, "Some Aspects of the Influence of Social Problems and Ideas Upon the Study and Writing of History" *American Journal of Sociology* 18 (1912-13): 663.

into the story of the founding, noting that the question of 'who should rule at home' was as important to the story of American independence as that of home rule.[28] This early historiographical questioning of national unity at the founding foreshadowed more dramatic challenges to come.

The questioning of the authority of the past that began in the interwar period continued and, as Novick carefully charts, ran alongside a decline in historian's commitments to objective truth and to the concept of historical progress into the twenty-first century. Historians properly place historical truth, as much as myth, under critical scrutiny; yet alongside the problematisation and rejection of nationalistic founding myths, historians of the American Revolution have, in large part, surrendered their special claim to truth-telling about the past.[29] Lin-Manuel Miranda's bold musical show has exposed this hesitancy and filled a void, presenting a patriotic and heroic tale for public consumption to much acclaim. In exploring this shift, this essay first surveys the shifting meanings, historical, mythical and otherwise, associated with the American Revolution in the decades since the founding. It then situates *Hamilton* within the current crisis in historical thinking that increasingly places the past at the service of the present. And finally, it marches Major General Hamilton through the heart of the divisive culture wars of the twenty-first century. Miranda has pressed Hamilton into public service as a twenty-first century culture warrior and in doing so, has exposed the deep ironies contained in the disconnect between historians and the public. The American public is thirsting for historical stories about the founding at the same time that professional historians seek ways to widen the public appeal of their work; yet the two groups have largely failed to connect.[30]

National Myth-Making

In Miranda's musical, history is messy and heroes are flawed. The Mixtape version of the Hamilton soundtrack kicks off with a short rap poem about conflict and disunity at the founding that sums up the approach; it challenges the mythical vision of national order and unity presented by artist John Trumbull's 1818 painting "Declaration of Independence" and suggests instead a greater recognition of

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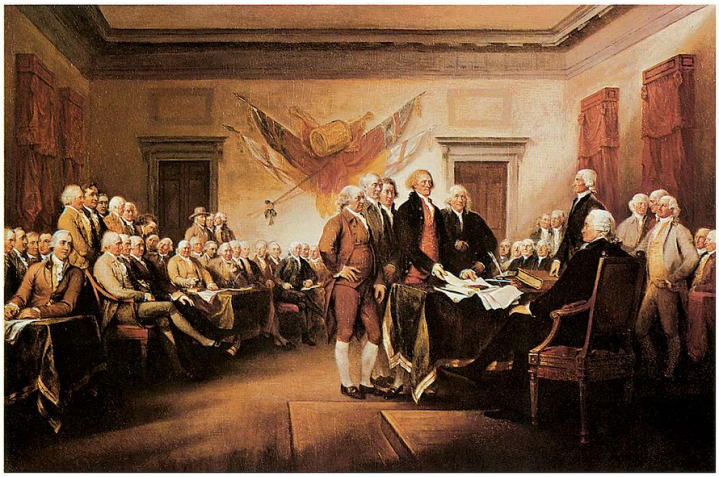
[28] The central publications of the Progressives as they relate to the founding are Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1913); Charles Beard, *The Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: How Hamilton's Merchant Class Lost Out to the Agrarian South* (New York: Macmillan, 1915); Carl L. Becker, *Beginnings of the American People* (Cambridge MA: Riverside Press, 1915); Carl L. Becker, *The Eve of the Revolution; A Chronicle of the Breach with England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1918); Carl L. Becker, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932). A important critical study of the Progressive school is Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians--Turner, Beard, Parrington* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[29] Michael Frisch's observation that historians must now share their authority with the public makes a virtue of a necessity as historians wrestle with the loss of their authority over the past. See Frisch, *A Shared Authority*; David Glassberg similarly presses historians to open themselves to the history the public presents to them, since "political and economic currents" will soon give them little choice in the matter. Jump first - surrender your professional authority before you are pushed, he seems to say. David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory" *The Public Historian*, 18. 2 (Spring, 1996): 23.

[30]The public discussion about historians' engagement in public has been fairly heated and contentious. See, for instance, Bagehot, "The Study of History is in Decline in Britain" The Economist (18 July, 2019) https://www.economist.com/britain/2019/07/18/the-study-of-history-is-in-decline-in-britain [accessed 30 December, 2019] and responses to it; Eric Alterman, "The Decline in Historical Thinking" *The New Yorker* (4 February, 2019).

division and discord among the founders and the need for more complexity in historical understanding.

Ever seen a painting by John Trumbull?
Founding Fathers in a line, looking all humble
Patiently waiting to sign a declaration and start a nation
No sign of disagreement, not one grumble
The reality is messier and richer, kids
The reality is not a pretty picture, kids
Every cabinet meeting is like a full-on rumble
What you're about to witness is no John Trumbull.[31]



John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence (1819)*

Miranda's interpretation of the contested nature of politics in the revolutionary era and, especially, the new republic is directly influenced by mainstream historiography. Historian Ron Chernow, whose popular history book inspired the musical and who acted as a historical consultant on the show, pointed out that Miranda 'want[ed] historians to take this seriously.'[32] By questioning the reliability of Trumbull's painting – a much-heralded cultural representation of harmony and accord among patriots at the outset of the revolution – Miranda demonstrated that he had done his homework.

There's no doubt that the newly established federal government of 1789, like any national government, required a degree of national unity to function effectively. Miranda is right, of course, that in the immediate aftermath of Revolution, few Americans – even national leaders – cared much about that. Indeed, in the wake of arbitrary and oppressive British rule, American patriots generally preferred that any central government remain as weak and ineffective as possible. The Articles of Confederation (1777-1789) had no power of taxation, could not regulate trade and left most power in the hands of the individual states. Neither did the newly-independent patriots embrace a robust

[31] The Roots, "No John Trumbull (Intro.)," track no. 1 *The Hamilton Mixtape* (2016)
[32] Curt Schleier, "The Jewish historian behind Broadway's hip-hop hit 'Hamilton'" *The Times of Israel* (14 Sept 2015) https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-jewish-historian-behind-broadways-hip-hop-hit-hamilton/ [accessed 9 July 2019]. See also Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd., 2016).

national identity as a necessary unifying goal; the United States remained a plural noun as differences of state residence, religious affiliation, sectional loyalty (east-west as much as north-south), ethnic identity, financial solvency, and occupational status many among other differences, divided the new nation.[33] The first historian of the Revolution, David Ramsay, expressed much anxiety about actual and potential political divisions between the states and social, religious, economic and ethnic divisions within the states. Ramsay's history was, in part, an instrument meant to inculcate national unity where it did not yet exist; according to Lester Cohen, Ramsay sought to "incite future generations to commit themselves to the principles of revolutionary republicanism."[34]

The Revolution of the 1770s and 80s did not, then, instantly produce a nation, much less a unified people. It has, however, come to sit at the heart of American political traditions as the most vivid and meaningful symbol of national unity and collective history. Many American presidents have drawn on the authority of the founding to establish and cohere the nation around a set of shared values. This is as true in recent years as formerly. In his inaugural address in 2005, George W. Bush invoked the ringing of the Liberty Bell down the years since 1776 in an effort to deliver foundational authority to his War on Terror.[35] At his 2009 inauguration, Barack Obama conjured the country's founding four separate times, calling on the Declaration of Independence, the Revolution and the US Constitution as beacons to light the way through the economic challenges and security threats that Americans faced at home and abroad.[36] President Trump, despite his Tea Party connections, did not refer to the founding during his inauguration speech at all (although he did say 'America' thirty times – more than any other President).[37]

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[33] As we have seen, Beard and Becker's claims of conflict and disorder were made as early as 1913 but it is only since the 1970s that historians have generally accepted a lack of consensus during the Revolution and the ubiquity of social and political conflicts during the 1780s. For loyalism, see Robert A. East and Jacob Judd, eds., *The Loyalist Americans: A Focus on Greater New York* (Tarrytown: Sleepy Hollow Restorations, 1975); David Hall, John M. Morrin, and Thad W. Tate, eds., *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1984); J. Bannister and L. Riordan, eds., *The Loyal Atlantic: Remaking the British Atlantic in the Revolutionary Era* (Toronto, 2012); Rebecca Brannon, *From Revolution to Reunion: The Reintegration of the South Carolina Loyalists* (University of South Carolina Press, 2016); Ruma Chopra, *Choosing Sides: Loyalists in Revolutionary America* (Plymouth: Rowan & Littlefield, 2013). On the tumult of the 1780s, see Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2008); Leonard L. Richards, *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); David Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Pauline Maier, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011); Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); a useful synthesis of the many conflicts of the American revolutionary era that defied national unity, see Alan Taylor's *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2016).

[34] David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution in Two Volumes* (1789; reis., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1990); see Lester H. Cohen "Foreword" in Ibid.; and Lester H. Cohen, "Creating a Usable Future: The Revolutionary Historians and the National Past" in Jack P. Greene (ed.) *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits* (New York: New York University Press, 1987): 309-330.

[35] George W. Bush, "Second Inaugural Address of George W. Bush" *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School* (January 20, 2005).

[36] Barack H. Obama, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address" (January 21, 2009)

[37] Patrick Scott, "Donald Trump delivered the most "American" inauguration speech ever" *The Telegraph* (23 January, 2017)

Yet, despite their absence in the 1780s, and despite their manipulation and mythologizing by current-day elites for their own political purposes, collective memories of the Revolution still resonate with the American people and serve as a touchstone for national identity.[38] It is noteworthy that while Miranda accepts historians' claims about the divided nature of the early republic, correcting earlier mythical accounts that stressed unity, he pushes on to make a hero of Hamilton, the founder who fought hardest to unify the nation and centralise power. It is Miranda's willingness to bridge the divide between historical truth and national myth that accounts for the wide appeal of his storytelling. Indeed, the era of the Revolution provides a store of memorable events and inspirational stories – of Paul Revere's courageous Ride, the rebellious dumping of tea in Boston harbour, the boldly defiant signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the glory of American victory at Yorktown – that continue to rouse and unite American citizens.

Miranda's *Hamilton* taps into this stream of popular storytelling as well as into many of the best, most enlightened ideals established by the American Revolution, underlining their continuing relevance. The show feeds the current demand for heroic tales of the founding fathers and engages the intense contemporary interest in the history and heritage of revolutionary America. It is the most right-on expression of 'founders chic.'[39] It operates as an origins story but it also provides a classic Horatio Alger tale of rags-to-riches success, drawing on the deep cultural veins of the American Dream. Hamilton, a poor orphan boy (just like his country, "young, scrappy and hungry,") makes good through his hard work, determination and willingness to take risks for a cause he believes in. Presented as an immigrant outsider who fought his way into "the room where it happens," Caribbean-born Hamilton "gets the job done." Miranda's Yorktown tribute secures heroic status for Hamilton, whose military ingenuity and great personal bravery helped turn the British Empire – and the colonial world – upside down.[40]

Historians are less comfortable with Miranda's heroic mythmaking than they are with his exposure of character flaws and historical incongruities. Initial responses to *Hamilton* have been mixed, but largely ungenerous, although it is not entirely clear whether it is the show's enormous success or its fictional

[38] For example, see Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Montesano, "Famous Americans: The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes" *Journal of American History* 94.4 (March 2008); Michael A. McDonnell, "War and Nationhood: Founding Myths and Historical Realities" in McDonnell et al. (eds.) *Remembering the Revolution: Memory, History and Nation Making from Independence to Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013): 19-40.
[39] H.W. Brands '"Founders Chic" *The Atlantic* (Sept., 2003) https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/09/founders-chic/302773/ [accessed 1 Jan, 2020] provides an overview of the concept and some of the publications it refers to. Since 2003, the category has only expanded, to include a TV adaptation of McCullough's book on John Adams and Ron Chernow's books on Hamilton and Washington, among others.
[40] Lyrics quoted are from Lin-Manuel Miranda, "My Shot" track 3, disc 1; "The Room Where it Happens" track 5, disc 2 and "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)," track 20, disc 1, *Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording)* 2015.

nature that fuels the criticisms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, historians' strongest rebukes are directed at the mythical elements of *Hamilton*: its appeal to the building of a national consensus and its 'great man' version of history that makes a national hero out of Hamilton. Historian Ken Owen notes with regret that while "historians have lambasted the phenomenon of Founders Chic as a fundamental distortion of history," Miranda's version of the revolution is little more than hagiography, exaggerating "the importance of individuals, at the expense of understanding the contribution of less-celebrated Americans or the role of broader societal and historical processes."[41] Many contributors to the volume *Historians on Hamilton* share this view; one essay condemns *Hamilton* because the show "sets out to rescue and renew an embarrassingly patriotic, partisan and partial version of early American history. It makes its hero into a great white hope for the founding, spinning a neo-Federalist, anti-slavery past that is myth, not history."[42] Other essays critique the musical for its historical inaccuracies and misrepresentations and use historical 'facts' to discipline and censor Miranda over questions of race, policy and personality. William Hogeland suggests that Miranda's distortions might be countered at the source by academic historians, who, he charges, have a duty to upend the claims of popular history books like Chernow's to prevent simplifications and inaccuracies seeping into mass entertainment.[43] It is not clear, however, whether this dry and dusty Gradgrindian response provides a service to either historical writing or musical theatre.

Other responses demonstrate greater sensitivity to the difference between 'facts' and truth in the broader sense. Joanne Freeman, prominent historian of the revolution and expert consultant to Miranda, notes that while *Hamilton* flattens many historical complexities – especially the political ideas of Hamilton and his main rival Thomas Jefferson – and "takes great liberties with the period's history," it nevertheless "gets the underlying spirit of the moment right." That spirit – of contingency and experimentation – is represented emphatically in the show's vibrant and dynamic hip-hop score. Freeman understands that different rules apply to Miranda's *Hamilton* than to history books, since it is, above all else, "a work of historical fiction."[44]

The discomfort that some historians express about the mythical elements of *Hamilton* suggests a need to look again at the nature of historical fiction and the cultural work it does. Cultural historian Warren Susman explores this problem by examining the ongoing tensions that exist between mythical

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[41] Ken Owen, "Historians and Hamilton: Founders Chic and the Cult of Personality" *The Junto* (21 April, 2016) https://earlyamericanists.com/2016/04/21/historians-and-hamilton-founders-chic-and-the-cult-of-personality/ [accessed 1 Jan, 2020]
[42] David Waldstreicher and Jeffrey L. Paisley, "Hamilton as Founders Chic: A Neo-Federalist, Anti-Slavery Usable Past?" in Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter (eds.) *Historians on Hamilton* (2018):140.
[43] William Hogeland, "From Ron Chernows' *Alexander Hamilton* to *Hamilton: An American Musical*" in Romano, R. and Potter C. (eds.) *Historians on Hamilton* (2018): 17-41.
[44] Joanne Freeman, "Can We Get Back to Politics? Please?" in Romano, R. and Potter C. (eds.) *Historians on Hamilton* (2018): 52, 44.

representations of the past and critical historical ones. Susman notes that while myth and history work in essentially contradictory ways, they often overlap and exist together, in creative tension;[45]

> it is this very tension between the mythic beliefs of a people- their visions, their hopes, their dreams-and the on-going, dynamic demands of their social life recorded by the students of the real past and the actual present (with perhaps an often-implied future) which provides many artists with their theme, a theme reflecting a basic conflict within the culture itself.[46]

Art, unlike history, is able to embrace and express the tensions between popular myth and history that the popular culture contains. *Hamilton*, alongside other historical fictions, has come to play a role in the national consciousness that – as we shall see below – some versions of history once played; it allows its audience the space to work through the contradictions between their hopes, dreams and aspirations on the one hand, and their real experiences and knowledge of the lived past on the other. Academic history no longer seeks to comfort or affirm; rather, it usually involves, even demands, a high level of critical self-questioning. As historians have broken down consensus and decentred narratives, as they have elevated the marginal and the subaltern, becoming sceptical of 'great men' and national heroes – the need for inspiration, unity and national identity must be met elsewhere. As the high priestess of historical fiction, Hilary Mantel, put it, "first the gods go, and then the heroes, and then we are left with our grubby, compromised selves."[47] While Miranda's Hamilton – like Mantel's own Thomas Cromwell – is indeed a compromised hero in many ways, he remains a hero who is able to reconcile the values of the nation's hopeful, enlightened founding with those of the fragmented, disillusioned twenty-first century, comforting and challenging the audience in turn.

Nevertheless, it is not just historians' misreading of what Miranda does (critiquing art as if it were history, either for spinning myths or for getting facts wrong) that poses a problem. Historians are too often disorientated about their own public role, especially in navigating the community's relationship between the past, the present and the future. The 'myth-busting' role outlined by J.H. Plumb limits historians' ability to connect with the national imaginary.[48] Since the publication of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*, historians of nationalism understand that Americans have 'imagined' their national community and 'invented' national traditions through rituals of remembrance and commemoration.[49] Yet, they often do not accept the legitimacy of these identifications. Anderson's important work underlines how cultural symbols and rituals that represent national identity carry a great weight of emotional

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[45] Warren I. Susman, "History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past" *American Quarterly*, Vol. 16. 2 (Summer, 1964): 243-263.
[46] Susman, "History and the American Intellectual": 248.
[47] Hilary Mantel, "The Day is for the Living" *BBC Reith Lectures* (17 June, 2017).
[48] In his *Death of the Past*, Plumb notes the irony of critical history destroying the "synthesizing and comprehensive statement of human destiny" offered first by Christianity, then by "the concept of progress, the manifest destinies of competitive nationalism, social Darwinism, or dialectical materialism." p136
[49] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Books, 2nd ed. 2016); Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). The best example of this approach applied to the revolutionary era is David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (University North Carolina Press, 1997).

legitimacy for citizens. For Anderson, the imagined nature of the national community does not indicate its falsity so much as its constructed-ness; it is an imagined community whose bonds are created and reinforced by every generation. As historians seek to bust these myths in public, as Jill Lepore and others do, they are unlikely to make a connection with those who find them meaningful. Moreover, Anderson chastises those who only see sinister delusion in the operation of the national imagination: "In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the other and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love."[50] In their critical analyses, academic historians seeks to counter, challenge and demystify, rather than understand and explain, that love.

Historicising the Revolution

Unlike European nations, the new American republic was from the beginning undeniably modern, making no dubious claims, as European nationalists did, to communal connections deep into the pre-modern era. Arguably the first modern nation-state, the United States had no roots in the ancient forests, no primordial languages or bloodlines that could be traced far back by nobility or monarchy. Indeed, this has always been the basis of American assertions of exceptionalism. The American nation was formed through armed struggle and willed into being by political reasoning and rational planning. It was also made up of diverse groups; it was a nation of immigrants with little shared cultural heritage to forge unity from. Americans had to start from scratch; but traditions could not be invented, and communities could not be imagined out of thin air. If there was no past, how could there be any historical memory?

The revolution was a dramatic break with the past and so the national idea came to rest on this instead. The nation understood itself not through the past, but in the present and with a future-orientation (the defining orientation of the modern world according to Hartog's schema). For at least the first century of American history, it was feasible for Americans to relegate history to the past and to let the dead bury their dead.[51] Animated by Lockean liberalism and armed with a vast optimism about the future, the first American generations understood time as redemptive and, according to Joyce Appleby, "embraced a conception of human nature that emphasized its benign potential."[52] The

[50] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 141.
[51] Lester H. Cohen, "Creating a Usable Future," 309-330.
[52] The claim that liberal ideology forged and evidenced American exceptionalism came from Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955; reis., New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1991); more recent versions cast the power of liberal ideology with its concomitant faith in the future in a more mediated way, see Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, 1984); John Patrick Diggins *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest and the Foundations of Liberalism* (New York, 1984); Isaac Kramnick "Republican Revisionism Revisited" *American Historical Review*, 87 (June 1982) 833-49; James Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Quotation is from Joyce

idea of the nation as a 'clean slate' that dominated political thinking in the founding years of the republic reached mythical proportions on the nineteenth-century frontier. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that in the US, "there are no traditions, or common habits, to forge links between their minds."[53] Thus, the 'new dawn' of the Revolution came to sit at the heart of the American national self-image.

Every generation of Americans built upon the myth, creating its own Revolution and writing its own history of the founding. In more recent historiography, however, historians have destabilised the narrative coherence of the Revolution by relativising and historicising national understandings of the founding.[54] Michael Kammen's *A Season of Youth* (1978) was a departure in the historiography; it traces the multiple ways in which the American Revolution has been remembered, forgotten, and contested over the more than two centuries since its founding. So, for example, Kammen observes that in reaction to the demands for a more radical democracy among working men in the age of Jackson, members of the cultural elite were discomforted by an emphasis on the radicalism of the revolution; and as abolitionism emerged in the 1830s, they discouraged comparisons between their own revolution and those in Haiti (1791-1804) and Latin America (1799-1820s). American artists and writers responded to what they now saw as dangerous, democratic demands by emphasizing the caution and reluctance of the U.S. Founders' rebellion and the overriding respect for law and order that prevailed among framers of the Constitution.[55] Indeed, Trumbull's painting 'The Declaration of Independence' – a study not only of national unity but also of orderly restraint and calm deliberation – was completed in this period and was hung in the US Capitol rotunda in 1826, where it remains.[56] Thus, Kammen's book began the historicist shift toward reading the revolution as a cultural text that took on a range of myth-like representations in different time periods.

In order to get to this post-1970s shift, it is worth briefly surveying the fortunes of the revolution in the hands of Americans, especially historians but also others who sought to make something of the revolutionary inheritance, across the ages. In the founding generation itself, John Adams expressed concern about the writing of revolutionary history, hoping it should not be narrowed to the bloody war (1775-1783) since it rested instead on a radical shift in the hearts and minds of colonists and on the novel unity established among and between the colonies, "Thirteen Clocks were made to Strike

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Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1992): 299.

[53] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969): 473.

[54] For literature in the field that points in these directions see Michael A. McDonnell et al., *Remembering the Revolution*; and Patrick Spero and Michael Zuckerman, eds., *The American Revolution Reborn* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016)

[55] Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, pp.46-47.

[56] Trumbull's painting also appeared on the $100 bank note issued in 1863, a symbol of unity in the midst of the greatest crisis faced by the Union. It currently appears on the two-dollar bill.

together; a perfection of Mechanism which no Artist had ever before effected."[57] In the new Republic, both sides of the ratification debates drew on different aspects of the revolution to legitimize their vision in building the nation. The divisive politics of the 1790s demonstrated that the founders did not share a vision of the national community and how it should function. It is worth noting that in his play, Miranda pits Hamilton against Jefferson in two major 'rap battles' to underline these divisions, but also to highlight the political compromises they necessitated to ensure the future of the republic. Both Hamilton's Federalists and Jefferson's Republicans held with universalistic claims about human justice, so that the limited nature of any single political viewpoint could be corrected through rigorous contestation to reveal the general public good beneath. On taking the presidency in 1801, Jefferson noted that "every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all republicans. We are all federalists."[58] Adams and Jefferson inadvertently consecrated the union further when they both died on the 4th July 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration.

Once living memory could no longer recall the revolution, it persisted as both myth and history. Undoubtedly, the emerging nationalism of the nineteenth century coloured Americans' historical imagination about their revolution. Supremely confident and arguably chauvinistic, George Bancroft's *History of the United States* celebrated the birth of the Republic as the work of Providence and was hailed as "our great defence of the rise of American nationality, our most fervent apology for the war of independence in all its untutored Americanism."[59] Plumb's verdict on Bancroft was that he, along with other romantic historians of the nineteenth century, was not really a historian at all but a "manufacturer of a new past for America." Bancroft's name has since become an adjective of insult in evaluating historical work on the revolution.[60] Yet, while present-day historians dismiss the romantic fictions of Bancroft's exceptionalism and nationalism, his work also reflected the growing democratic sensibilities of the mid-nineteenth century.[61] Winthrop Jordan notes that the rise of a democratic consciousness among working men, blacks and women in the 1830s coincided with a "sense of

[57] John Adams, Letter to Hezekiah Niles, 13 Feb 1818. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6854 [Accessed 11 April, 2020]
[58] Thomas Jefferson "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1801. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states/peaceful-transition.html [accessed 9 May 2020]
[59] Watt Stewart, "George Bancroft Historian of the American Republic" *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 19. 1 (June, 1932): 86; George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the American Continent* (Boston: Little, Brown & co., 10 vols. 1854–1878).
[60] Plumb, *The Death of the Past*: 89; Michael D. Hattem, "Where have you gone, Gordon Wood?", *The Junto: A Group Blog on Early America* (Jan 21, 2013). https://earlyamericanists.com/2013/01/21/where-have-you-gone-gordon-wood/ [Accessed 14 August, 2019].
[61] Eileen Ka-May Cheng, "Plagiarism in Pursuit of Historical Truth" in McDonnell, Michael et al., *Remembering the Revolution*: 144-161 makes an interesting case that Bancroft's plagiarism of Loyalist historian George Chalmers puts to question the validity of JH Plumb's distinction between "critical" (true) history and that employed by the guardians of tradition to sanctify the established order and give meaning to the present – or what Gordon Wood notes is now the preserve of "memory." See also her The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth: Nationalism and Impartiality in American Historical Writing, 1784-1860 (Athens, GA.: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

permanent democratic nationhood." The temporal conjunction of abolition and women's rights with democratic nationhood, Jordan argues, was not accidental. Since a bedrock assumption of majoritarianism underpinned revolutionary ideals, any ambiguities and omissions in the phrase "we the people" soon came to testify "less to the weakness of the revolutionary agenda than to its sweeping power in the face of social realities."[62] Democratic nationalism did not eradicate the universalism of the revolutionary generation, as often assumed, but operated as a mechanism of fulfilment for it.

Each generation came to terms with national founding ideals – of freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness – in its own way. Some moved closer to those ideals, others moved further away. In the decades leading to the Civil War, the abolitionist movement sought to expand the scope of promised freedoms. Some slaves and free blacks questioned whether the Fourth of July celebration applied to them and marked the national holiday on the Fifth of July instead, to indicate their continued exclusion. In a famous abolitionist address on 5 July 1852, Frederick Douglass asked: "What to the American slave, is your 4th of July?"

> To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.[63]

Despite such strong denunciations of the limitations of founding values and the hypocrisy in their expression, most abolitionists did not discard them. Rather, they called on the moral power of the revolution to demand that freedom and equality be extended to all Americans. Similarly, the women's rights' movement issued a 'Declaration of Sentiments' at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, modelled on the Declaration of Independence and using much of the same language to mark the start of a campaign for civil equality for women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's text declared that "all men and women are created equal" and went on to demand equal civil, political and social rights for women.[64] Meanwhile, both Southern Confederates and Union politicians sought justification for their own cause in the revolutionary principles. Initially competing for ownership of the spirit of '76, Unionists were

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[62] Winthrop Jordan, "On the Bracketing of Blacks and Women in the Same Agenda" in Jack Greene (ed.) *The American Revolution,* 281.
[63] Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" Rochester, New York (July 5, 1852): http://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech_complete.pdf [accessed 12 July, 2019] John Ernest's discussion of race and nation through the prism of Douglass's speech is insightful, see his *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 233-37.
[64] Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al. "The Declaration of Sentiments" Seneca Falls (July, 1848) https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm [accessed 12 July 2019]

begrudgingly obliged to rally behind Abraham Lincoln's more conservative defence of the Constitution and cede the radical freedoms of 1776 to the Southern rebels. After the war was won, however, black Southerners monopolized community celebrations of the 4th of July for some time.[65] Historical usage points toward a radical contingency in the meaning of the founding for different social groups in different eras, yet all groups across the nineteenth century sought to align themselves with founding ideals and values however these were interpreted.

In the early twentieth century, historians shifted toward a more empirical methodology for writing the revolution; at once looking out from the colonies to relations within the Empire and examining the social and economic conflicts within. As the modern United States acquired its own colonies after 1898, it became more sensitive (if not sympathetic) to the actions the British Empire had taken in the eighteenth century. In his 1925 presidential address to the American Historical Association, Charles Andrews contrasted the 'stale' and 'rigid' psychology underpinning British rule with the dynamic, expansive outlook in the American colonies. Progress, he cautioned, could be stemmed temporarily but "cannot be permanently stopped by force."[66] Thus, the Revolution provided lessons both to Britain in the eighteenth century and to the United States in the twentieth: that imperial management required ongoing reform and enlightened government, at home and abroad. Progressive and imperial historians, often one and the same, dominated the interwar interpretation of the revolution and founding. As we have seen, Beard, Becker and other progressives drew attention to the conflict and division within the new republic in their forging of a usable past. Their historical imaginations were professional and critical, for sure, but they also crafted a chronological continuum that celebrated progress and was largely future-oriented.

Since the Second World War, neo-Whig and neo-Progressive interpretations have constantly sparred in revolutionary historiography. Edmund Morgan's work challenged interwar determinism, signalling that historians might properly take the ideas of the founders seriously rather than decoding some underlying economic or psychological motivation. Morgan paved the way for the 'republican synthesis' of J.G.A. Pocock, Bernard Bailyn and others, who note the ironies of a revolution that drew on established British political traditions of rights and freedoms in order to overthrow the imperial status quo. It points to the virtuous character of a (singular) people whose industry, frugality and simplicity enabled them to resist the corruption and luxury of the bloated British Empire. While the revolution was essentially a conservative movement for Bailyn, American independence brought with

[65] Kammen, *A Season of Youth:* 58.
[66] Charles M. Andrews, "The American Revolution: An Interpretation" Presidential address delivered before the American Historical Association at Ann Arbor, Michigan, December 29, 1925. *American Historical Review* 31, no. 2 (January 1926): 219–32. https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/charles-m-andrews-(1925) [accessed 17 April, 2020]

it sweeping radical consequences in the form of a veritable "contagion of liberty."[67] Gordon Wood concurs, indicating that the revolution took Americans "out of an essentially classical and mediaeval world . . . into one that was recognizably modern."[68] Historians writing from within the republican synthesis tended to emphasize a common political culture and unity of action among patriots.[69]

While neo-Whigs like Bailyn and Wood focused on political culture, neo-Progressive historians unearthed the lived experiences of marginal groups and the role they played in bringing on the revolution. Expanding the cast of actors from elite, white men to slaves, women, native Americans, workers, Loyalists and others; these histories integrated minorities into the larger political narrative of the Revolution.[70] During the 1960s and 70s, as marginal and minority groups made their voices heard in public, historians folded their diverse stories into the national origins story. And, just as in the mid-nineteenth century, women and African Americans who sought greater political inclusion and social equality found a way to bolster their claim by appealing to the nation's founding ideals. In particular, the civil rights movement invoked the revolutionary era in a range of ways. Most famously, Martin Luther King's 1963 'I Have a Dream' speech referred to the revolution and the national founding in hopeful terms:

> When the architects of our Republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men - yes, black men as well as white men - would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.[71]

King noted that the nation had defaulted on that promissory note and, like Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and numerous other Americans before him, demanded that America keep its promises to *all* Americans.

At least until the 1960s, then, a good deal of faith in founding ideals remained - even (or especially) among those who had reason to doubt their veracity. Excluded groups, reformers and intellectuals, including historians, often wielded these ideals as a means of making them real and universally

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[67] See especially Edmund S. Morgan and Helen S. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953)' Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); and J.G.A. Pocock *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Republican Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).
[68]Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969): viii.
[69] For useful discussions of the republican synthesis, see Robert E. Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 29. 1 (January 1972): 49-80; Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 334-56; and Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept" *Journal of American History*, 79, 1 (June 1992): 11-38.
[70] There are too many examples to include an exhaustive list, but three significant and indicative works are: Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25. 3 (1968):371-407; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); and Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1980).
[71] Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream" Washington DC (1963): https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf [accessed 12 July 2019]

applicable. Douglass, Stanton and King each condemned the pretence to national unity as a sham but pointed a way forward, outlining how the national community could embrace its promise and properly include and empower all citizens. The revolution, they insisted, belonged to all Americans. This optimism about equality, inclusion and unity began to change in the 1970s, however, both within the broader political culture and in the writing of history.

The Problem of Presentism

Since the 1970s and with gathering pace from the 1990s, the reimagining of the American founding moment changed dramatically. It is not just that values continued to shift as those of past generations had (although that has certainly happened) but that a fundamental reconfiguration in the relationship between the present and the past has taken place and is reflected in thinking about the Revolution. The transformation was not sudden or immediate but has moved toward what Francois Hartog locates as an "omnipresent present" within the reigning "regime of historicity."[72] Claims on the founding are no longer the means through which historians orientate Americans toward the future; instead, they more often telescope a fractured national past into a segmented present. The ideals and values of the revolutionary myth have shed their universal and aspirational character, and therefore their ability to unify at the national level. These presentist divisions may prove to be more destructive to a coherent history of the American Revolution than even the Civil War, throughout which both sides had competed in laying claim to a set of common founding values.[73]

If the past was dying as Plumb claimed in 1969, the future began to crumble soon after. In the 1970s, the concept of progress, essential to optimistic versions of the future, found itself embattled from all sides: environmental hazards, high-level political corruption and defeat in a seemingly meaningless war in Vietnam. Thus, faith in progress, once central to the understanding of American history, became inimical. Responding to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Daniel Bell declared the "end of American exceptionalism." America, Bell argued, no longer inspired belief in a "manifest destiny"; it

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[72] In his *Regimes of Historicity*, Hartog identifies a 'regime of historicity' as an ideal category constructed by the historian "whose value lies in its heuristic potential." He identifies a number of such regimes, including a past orientation until the French Revolution, a future-orientation until the 1980s, and then a present-orientation in the years since.

[73] Historian Annette Gordon-Reed recently noted that in his famous speech setting out the rationale for secession, Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens renounced the Declaration of Independence. While it is true that in 1861, Stephens denied the natural equality of man asserted in the Declaration, he also embraced the revolutionary tradition it represented, citing differences with non-seceding border states as differences of policy not principle and quoting Jefferson's 1801 inaugural address. Moreover, Jefferson Davis declared that "if the Declaration of Independence be true (and who here gainsays it?) every community may dissolve its connection with any other community previously made." For this and other Confederate appeals to revolutionary heritage, see Kammen, *A Season of Youth*: 57; Annette Gordon-Reed, "Erasing History or Making History? Race, Racism, and the American Memorial Landscape" AHA discussion (2 July, 2020) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvKw57_53Ds [accessed 2 July, 2020]; Alexander H. Stephens, 1861 'Cornerstone Speech' https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/cornerstone-speech [accessed 19 July 2020].

was no longer an exemplary "city upon a hill." Not only Vietnam but the experience of two World Wars, Hiroshima, and recurrent domestic problems of poverty and racism meant that the past began to haunt the American imagination.[74] Moreover, Americans were fractured and divided along numerous cultural and political lines that a common history, even of the Revolution, failed to bridge. Increasingly, American intellectuals, including historians, wrestled with and assumed the burden of the guilt, pain, tragedy and irony of the American past, shunning celebratory exceptionalism.[75] Liberal theorists argued that the self-possessed individual had outlived his historic purpose and that the social demands of the modern world required a socialized (what David Riesman called an "other-directed") individual.[76] Americans no longer continually remade themselves - on the frontier, or by otherwise relocating – but were now forced to confront the limitations of their cultural coding.

The bicentennial of the revolution in 1976 threw into stark relief these changes in American thought and culture. Just as historians had grown uncomfortable with celebrating national traditions, so other intellectuals – especially artists – began to highlight the disconnect between representations and (more sordid) realities. Iconoclastic 'funk' artists turned their attention toward the revolution and its traditional artistic representation. In his 1851 "Washington Crossing the Delaware," Emanuel Leutze had positioned General Washington in a bold, heroic stance as a proud flagbearer of a new nation. As the sun rises on the horizon, all around him determined patriots rowed in concerted unison to meet the enemy and claim independence. Leutze's is a Romantic, patriotic and myth-like representation.

Emanuel Leutze, Washington Crossing the Delaware (1851)

[74] Daniel Bell, "The End of American Exceptionalism" *National Affairs* 39 (Fall, 1975): 193-224.
[75] One of the best examples is the trilogy of C. Vann Woodward's essays, "The Irony of Southern History" (1953); "A Second Look at the Theme of Irony" (1968) and "Look Away, Look Away," (1993) which charts the casting off of an exceptionalist American self-image dominated by innocence and virtue and embracing instead one of tragedy and irony, previously only known to the South. See his *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1993).
[76] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 2nd ed.)

By contrast, Peter Saul's 1975 version of the crossing depicts Washington in caricature, his boat sinking amidst ice blocks, riding a cartoonish steed into the river and waving a tiny American flag as the motley characters surrounding him fall headlong into the river. Saul presents an iconoclastic parody of mock heroism, sardonically ridiculing Washington and showing him to devastating effect as more pathetic than either great or terrible.[77] It is certain that most historians today feel more sympathy for Saul's chaotic irreverence than for Leutze's proud vision of the nation's leader. Michael Kammen's book historicizing the meaning of the revolution was inspired by cultural responses to the bicentennial, underlining the messy cross-fertilization of art and historiography.[78]

Peter Saul, Washington Crossing the Delaware (1975)

While Kammen historicizes the revolution, Francois Hartog's *Regimes of Historicity* effectively historicizes the experience of time itself. In the two centuries following the founding, within Hartog's "modern" regime of historicity, American culture had been deeply preoccupied with the future. By the last decades of the twentieth century, the sense of continuity essential to the notion of a single timeline of US history had largely dissolved; accumulated historical burdens and breaks in the experience of time made it impossible for future-facing exceptionalism to survive. The grand narratives that had determined historical time in the modern age came to an end – in 1989, if we believe Fukuyama – dismantling past and future, so that only the "monstrous" present is left.[79] One of the many ironies of American history is that the belief that the United States was immune from those historical laws which set the path for other nations was only exposed as myth just as belief in the power of "historical laws" dissipated globally.

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[77] Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 90, 234.
[78] Kammen notes that complaints about "all the trash called tradition" reached a crescendo during the bicentennial but was balanced against a rising tide of nostalgia; both expressions of national self-doubt, *Season of Youth* (1978): 12.
[79] Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, xvii; Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?"

Fukuyama's pronouncement of the "end of history," most obviously a response to the closing off of alternatives to liberal democracy, also came at the end of a decade in which studies of historical memory began proliferating.[80] The "end of history" represented not only a denial of the ability to create a different future, it also served to highlight the incapacity of historians to craft a past that existed independently from the present. The modern conception of history as a process (even an unbroken chronological line of progress), meant the past had been understood as "a foreign country" where things were done differently.[81] History as memory tries to close the distance and overcome the strangeness between past and present, forging a past that is familiar to the present. "Memory," Pierre Nora writes, "is no longer what must be retrieved from the past in order to prepare the future one wants; it is what makes the present present to itself "[82] The rise of presentism obscures both past and future, placing them both in the service of the present. Hartog goes as far as to suggest that this present "daily *fabricates* the past and future it requires, while privileging the immediate."[83]

The rewriting of the history of the American revolution in the current generation has therefore sought not only to expose the collective memory of the founding as myth, replacing it with a more critical reading, as past generations of historians have, but it implicitly denies that there was any meaningful revolution at all. Instead, there is an attempt to project present-day problems into the past, telescoping them beyond the responsibility of a solution. In a 2013 edited collection *Remembering the Revolution*, Michael McDonnell declares that any unifying national identity forged by the revolution was superficial and deceptive, operating simply as "a veneer in the run-up to the Civil War" and that, given the extreme diversity of accounts and rememberances, there was "no clear collective memory of the Revolution."[84] While this might not also imply no coherent history of the revolution, the blurring of lines between memory and history, with much greater emphasis on the former, elides the difference. So, rather than the revolution representing a radical break with the past or establishing the origins of a modern future in 1776, it has come to represent a myth in all its dimensions, reproduced across the ages. Thus, historians have variously argued that the revolution was not in fact heroic but a nihilistic, brutal bloodbath; that it was as much a civil war as one for independence, with deep divisions between

[80] Among the most important studies were Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) and Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-92) but studies proliferated in local, national and transnational settings. Among the best American studies of national memory were John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991).
[81] The famous opening line of L.P. Hartley's historical novel *The Go-Between*, about class relations in the English countryside during the Boer War runs "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1953): 7.
[82] Pierre Nora, 'Pour une histoire au second degre", *Le De´bat*, 122 (2002): 27, cited by Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 125.
[83] Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 129
[84] Michael A. McDonnell et al. (eds.), *Remembering the Revolution*, 7.

and among colonists, including between loyalist and patriot, elite and plebian, slave and master, Indian and frontiersman, men and women, as well as intra-colony conflicts.[85] Moreover, with scant evidence of attachment to the patriot cause among soldiers or civilians, the revolution represents little but the replacement of one set of elite personnel with another. The dissolving of national unity internally is mirrored in the external evaporation of any sense of the revolution's global significance; a good deal of scholarship is devoted to establishing the American revolution as just one incident in an Atlantic world full of shifting allegiances.[86] The post-national fantasies of the global twenty-first century are not simply recreated in but erase what happened in the eighteenth.

Past as Present; Art as History

The dominance of the present is perhaps even more evident in public history than in the academe. The first UNESCO world heritage site (Poland's Royal salt mines at Wieliczka) was named in 1978 and the U.S. established the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS) the same year. The French hosts of the fourth UNESCO's World Heritage Committee meeting designated 1980 an official year of heritage; that year also saw the UK pass the National Heritage Act. In the decades since, there has been a distinct uptick of interest and investment in personal genealogies and public commemorations as well as a proliferation of memorials, museums and other sites of memory. Preoccupation with heritage has intensified as the divergence between past and present has come to seem increasingly profound. That is, when time itself seems to be accelerating and the present appears unstable and uncertain, a solid past offers many reassurances. But since there is no available means to forge a new path forward to the future, refashioning the past only offers little more than a therapeutic balm for frustrations with the present. Hartog suggests that memory, commemoration and heritage have come to dominate our view of the past, with the "historical nation" transformed into a "memory-based nation" that cultivates both the past and the future into servants for the present.[87]

Miranda's *Hamilton* plays into an escalating projection of the present into the past and is particularly germane because it deals with the potentially explosive topic of the nation's origin story. Yet it also

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[85] Holger Hoock, *Scars of Independence: America's Violent Birth* (New York: Crown, 2017); Sarah Purcell, *Sealed with Blood War: Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2002); Michael A. McDonnell, *The Politics of War* (University North Carolina Press, 2007); Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War* (New York University Press, 1996); Patrick Griffin *American Leviathan* (Hill & Wang, 2007); Sung Bok Kim, "The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York," *Journal of American History* 80. 3 (December 1993): 868–889 all illuminate the brutal experience of the war and present the various participants as much as victims as protagonists.

[86] Robert G. Parkinson's *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (University North Carolina Press, 2016) reveals how patriot leaders ensured unity by disseminating racially charged stories about the British. Caitlyn Fitz, *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions* (Liveright, 2017) and Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2017); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Verso Books; Rev ed. Edition, 2002) are among those that frame events outside of and beyond the nation state; Tom Cutterham's *Gentleman Revolutionaries: Power and Justice in the New American Republic* (Princeton University Press, 2017) emphasizes continuities in elite power and hierarchy before and after the Revolution.

[87] Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 159.

reopens, or seems to reopen, the question of historical agency and the power and utility that the founding ideas of freedom and equality might have for Americans today. By engaging afresh with these themes, Miranda's twenty-first century *Hamilton* raises questions about whether history has really ended after all. *Hamilton* launches a renewed campaign for the hearts and minds of Americans in its innovative reframing of the military skirmishes and political battles that the revolutionary Hamilton fought in the eighteenth century. While Alexander Hamilton worked alongside George Washington in the 1770s and 1780s to usher forth a new nation, Miranda's *Hamilton* fights to redefine meaning and purpose in a nation suffering a severe identity crisis today.

The story Miranda tells is, of course, fictional but nevertheless works on a number of levels to put the past firmly in the service of the present. He understand this when he notes, "As a dramatist, my job is to eliminate any distance the audience feels from this era."[88] So, the black, Asian and Hispanic cast knowingly signal the diversity of America now, despite the entirely white cast of founding fathers then; the rap and R&B tunes tell Hamilton's story in a musical language that would have been entirely alien to the ears of eighteenth-century patriots; most tellingly, Hamilton himself was not in fact an immigrant who "got the job done," as Miranda depicts him. Born in the British Caribbean, Hamilton moved to British America as a young man – migrating from one part of the Empire to another. He helped to create the United States, he did not migrate into it. Yet, if immigration is not part of Hamilton's story, Miranda's fictional presentation taps into an important national myth that is not untrue. America's story is one of continuous immigration and the American experience has always been that of the transformation of peoples born elsewhere into Americans. Historical novelist Hilary Mantel underlines this point when she notes that "myth is not a falsehood – it is a truth, cast into symbol and metaphor."[89] Fiction can convey truths that run deeper than empirical facts.
Miranda's mythical story engages with contemporary issues of race, immigration and citizenship. In the context of twenty-first century globalization and the concomitant re-ignition of nationalist themes in politics, the question of immigration has become highly politicized. That *Hamilton* manages to navigate between national myths and contemporary realities so successfully is due, in part, to its willingness to embrace the ironies, complexities and contradictions in the historical story.[90] But it is also because, as Aristotle tells us, art penetrates to the inner significance of things as well as representing their outward appearance. Hamilton as a monarchical-aristocrat and Jefferson as a radical republican-democrat are not useful to Miranda's story of the present; instead, he offers Hamilton the immigrant-abolitionist and Jefferson the slave-owning dandy. With *Hamilton*, Miranda gets to the

[88] Lin Manuel Miranda, *A.P. US History: Special Edition with Lin-Manuel Miranda* (YouTube, 1 May 2020)https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fSQkPJpBqM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2oYogr0PFl1cXADDupmAYIZusfeZ5R6xkNFkeENldF9oEbG9bbxc2x_gA [accessed 1 May, 2020]
[89] Hillary Mantel, "The Iron Maiden" *BBC Reith Lectures* (24 June, 2017).
[90] Despite, or perhaps because of Hamilton's enormous popularity and success, a backlash against the story it tells emerged at the time of writing, in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, and the release of the film version of the musical on Disney+, 3 July, 2020.

significance of the contemporary scene – not that of the eighteenth century – and credits his audience with the intelligence to know that his story of the founding is an act of imagination and inventiveness, of artistic creativity not historical reconstruction. In the best sense, through his music and his message, Miranda repackages American traditions for a new, hip-hop generation.

If Miranda plays with myths and traditions and employs storytelling that serves the present, he is entitled to do so since, as he says, "I am writing a musical, not dealing with historical argument - and I can make stuff up if I want to. I have that dramatic license that you [historians] may not have."[91] Historians have a different responsibility to their audiences and to the past. Yet, Miranda's presentation of the fraught forging of national unity through the exercise of human agency might also recognize the current cultural moment as an opportunity to restart history. Perhaps *Hamilton*, straddling the divide between identity politics and the rise of populism, signals the end of the end of history? We can recognize that the creative historical act of nation-building that Alexander Hamilton engaged in through, for example, the centralization of debt, is not the same thing as spinning myths about national unity or greatness; it is the difference between history and myth. Yet, with presentism as the driving force there is a risk of understanding all history-writing as myth-making. Or, as Baudrillard suggests, perhaps our present relationship to time (our "regime of historicity") indicates that history is placing itself into the dustbin of history?[92] Whether the end of history has in fact ended, or we are condemned to "play out" an illusory ending in a hyper-teleological way, acting out the end of the end of the end, *ad infinitum,* remains to be seen. Miranda's *Hamilton* expresses in artistic form the tensions and frustrations of an America stuck in the present, with both past and future acting as mirrors rather than sources of inspiration or calls to action.

Many historians are concerned about the impact of growing presentism on the ability to write history. AHA president Lynn Hunt went so far in 2002 as to warn that the presentism of our current historical understanding "threatens to put us out of business as historians" since study of the contemporary past can easily be farmed out to political scientists or sociologists.[93] Historians endanger their USP if they place the needs of the present in the forefront of their concerns.[94] More worrying is the mission creep as we eye the popularity of historical fiction — novels, plays, and musicals — and seek some of the limelight for ourselves, forgetting our professional commitments to historical truth. Historian Joanne Freeman warns that *Hamilton* represents a not-obviously fictional "twenty-first century version of the

[91] Lin Manuel Miranda, *A.P. US History: Special Edition with Lin-Manuel Miranda* (YouTube, 1 May 2020).
[92] Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Polity Press, 1994): 26.
[93] Lynn Hunt, "Against Presentism" *Perspectives on History* (1 May 2002).
[94] For further insights on changes in history and its relationship with the past, see David Lowenthal *The Heritage Crusade* (Cambridge Universy Press, 2011). The classic reflection that retains much value is E.H. Carr, *What is History*? (London: MacMillen, 1961).

past that is hard to teach against."[95] Our failure of nerve, or loss of confidence, in framing history and in the robustness of the stories we tell reinforces the "sense that only the present exists . . . ," as Hartog has it, and our relationship with time becomes "characterised by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of unending now."[96]

History in the Culture Wars

When presentism dominates historical thinking, historians find themselves irresistibly drawn into public controversies. Since the 1980s, the teaching and writing of history has become a cultural battlefield in American schools, universities, publishing presses and museum spaces. A growing politicization of history in public led to a number of high-profile culture war controversies in the nineties about, most prominently national school textbook standards, a proposed Smithsonian exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, and over the second amendment following the publication and subsequent discrediting of Michael Bellesiles' *Arming America*.[97] All three of these disputes involved a clash between traditional and progressive versions of history with the balance of public opinion leaning toward the former and professional historians supporting the latter. Historian Andrew Hartman notes that Americans care about their history but "the gulf between how professional historians explained the nation's history and how most Americans understood it grew to immense proportions" in the 1990s.[98] Indeed, the American historical profession seemed increasingly aloof and at odds with public opinion, adopting postmodern theoretical approaches that heightened inhospitality to alternative perspectives inside academia and made them the targets of conservative ire outside.[99] Marxist historian of slavery Eugene Genovese condemned the AHA for the "specialized,

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[95] Joanne Freeman, "Telling Stories About the Past: Historians on Historical Fiction" *Back Story* podcast 304 (6 December 2019).
[96] Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*: xv.
[97] In 1994, Lynne Cheney launched an attack on the National History Standards that had been funded by the NEH (which she headed), developed by teacher task forces working with academic historians and endorsed by major professional and public interest organizations. The ensuing culture war resulted in the Senate voting the standards down 99-1 and substantial revisions being forced; While historians began questioning whether the use of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was justified during the 1980s, the proportion of Americans who thought the bombings necessary and just, while falling, remained in the majority (1945: 85%; 1995: 63%; 2015: 56%). Bruce Stokes, "70 years after Hiroshima, opinions have shifted on use of atomic bomb" https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/04/70-years-after-hiroshima-opinions-have-shifted-on-use-of-atomic-bomb/ [accessed 18 July 2020]; Political divisions over gun control and the second amendment are fairly complicated. According to Gallup polling, while more than half of American households owned a gun in the 1990s and support for the second amendment remained strong, support for limited gun control was also high and growing. See https://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx. Meanwhile, Bellesiles' book, which argued that gun ownership was rare before the Civil War so the second amendment was not reflective of cultural mores in the colonial or revolutionary era, garnered him a prestigious book contract with Knopf and much professional acclaim, including the Bancroft Prize, a clutch of positive reviews in top professional journals, NEH funding and a rallying statement of defense from the AHA even after the quality and veracity of his research came under attack. When the scale of Bellesiles' fraud became clear, he lost his job, his funding, his prize and his professional reputation. See Michael Bellesilles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2000).
[98] Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America,* 261.
[99] Hartman, citing Frederic Jameson's infamous 1984 essay 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' suggests that it signalled a culture war from which there was no escape, "The culture wars were the defining narrative of postmodern America." *A War for the Soul of America*, 252.

careerist, bureaucratised, and politically conformist" history-writing it encouraged.[100] Meanwhile, the public came to view historians engaged in culture war not as expert authorities in their field but as "just another special interest group."[101]

The growing estrangement between academic historians and the public over the nation's revolutionary origins left a gap that, soon, others filled. Popular biographies of the founders appeared under the new genre of "founders chic," including, of course, Ron Chernow's popular book about Alexander Hamilton, upon which Miranda's musical is based.[102] The public debate and the academic one interacts on various levels but the popularity of Miranda's *Hamilton* signalled that the border between campus and popular culture was porous and that the latter had grabbed the initiative in telling the historical story of the founding.

History wars over the founding raged into the twenty-first century. *Hamilton* itself emerged as a liberal retort to conservative claims on the nation's origins story and foundational values. The conversation it joined sat at the very heart of the culture wars that had been building for a generation or more. Among public responses to perceived assaults on the nation's foundational heritage from within liberal universities, museums, and presses was the populist right's Tea Party movement and the emergence of a range of shock-jock broadcasters and publications, such as Glenn Beck's treatise *Common Sense* and Ben Shapiro's *How To Destroy America in Three Easy Steps*.[103] Wielding arguments against centralised power and for constitutional defence of free speech and gun ownership rights, conservatives presented themselves as the true heirs of the founding fathers. America, right-wing populists assert, will be Great Again when the nation re-embraces the original intentions of the

[100] Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud – American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007): 128.
[101] Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 282.
[102] The field includes David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Joseph J. Ellis's two group biographies *Founding Brothers* (New York; Vintage Books, 2000) and *The Quartet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016) and several individual biographies including *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), *His Excellency George Washington* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005) and *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York; Vintage Books, 1998); H.W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002); Richard Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton, American* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) and *James Madison* (Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2011); Some academic historians joined the parade, frustrated by the growing insularity of the profession, see Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: the Life of Aaron Burr* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Edmund Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (Yale University Press, 2003); Gordon Wood, *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).
[103] Glenn Beck, *Common Sense The Case Against An Out-of-Control Government, Inspired by Thomas Paine* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009); In his introduction, Shapiro states that "Traditionally, Americans have learned that the values of the Declaration of Independence are eternal and true." Ben Shapiro, *How To Destroy America in Three Easy Steps* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020). It is ironic that the first half of Shapiro's introduction bewails the end of unity and consensus and the second half launches a full-scale attack on those he sees as the "disintegrators." Neither side of the culture war recognises their own role in creating insurmountable cultural division.

founders.[104] Legal originalism – the doctrine that justices must determine the public meaning of the Constitution at the framing in order to decide law – is on the rise and has been consolidated on the Supreme Court with President Trump's appointment of Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett.[105] In turn, liberal artists and intellectuals have responded with polemics against conservative versions of history that emphasizes tradition, continuity and "shared values" that, they claim, operate to exclude minorities. Historian Jill Lepore leads the public battle, denouncing the Tea Party's use of the Revolution as "blather," an "antihistory" that seeks to replace critical thinking with nostalgia.[106] Yet liberal claims on the founding have not replaced "antihistory" with historical thinking. Rather, they forged – and continue to forge – their own version of antihistory.

Arguments on both sides of the culture wars obscure the many changes that have taken place in American history since the founding. While conservatives insist nothing has changed and that the values of 1776 must still hold true, progressives seek to dispense with a problematic past, viewing the values of the founding as anachronistic and, often, morally dubious. Each erases the enormous shifts Americans have affected in the course of the intervening centuries. One of the starkest recent challenges to the reality of change and contingency in history came from *The New York Times'* 1619 Project. Indeed, by replacing 1776 with 1619 (the year the first Africans arrived in the American colonies), the project reframes the historical narrative to expunge changes wrought by the American revolution itself, writing its significance out of American history.[107] In her controversial opening essay, Nikole Hannah-Jones contends that,

> . . . the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true "founding fathers."[108]

The 1619 Project suggests that power structures erected a century and a half before the United States existed, when the American colonies were part of the British Empire, set in stone modes of control and racial oppression that continue to operate in the modern United States. This Foucauldian rendering also carries numerous factual errors and interpretive sleights that suit the narrative,

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[104] Rebecca E. Zietlow, "Popular Originalism? The Tea Party Movement and Constitutional Theory," *Florida Law Review* 64.2 (2012): 483-512; see also Theda Skocpol, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[105] Sol Wachtler, "Brett Kavanaugh Is an Originalist" *New York Law Journal* (20 September 2018); Michael Rips, "How the new justice's 'originalism' could reshape the US Supreme Court," *The Financial Times* (27 October 2020).
[106] Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes*, 97.
[107] In his "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative" *Journal of American History* 78. 4 (Mar., 1992): 1347-1376, William Cronon has written persuasively about the art of storytelling in writing history. Facing the postmodern challenge to truth-telling about the past, Cronon urges historians to keep their stories honest by tying them to some type of external reality and by submitting them to the collective critique of the professional historical community. I am indebted to Georgina Endfield for the reminder to consult Cronon on this question.
[108] Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true." 1619 Project. *The New York Times Magazine* (14 August 2019)

including the claim that the preservation of slavery was one of the main motivating factors behind the American Revolution.[109]

The 1619 Project drew great acclaim and spawned live events, a podcast series, educational packs for schools, a TV series and film in collaboration with Oprah Winfrey, and a Pulitzer prize for Nikole Hannah-Jones. It also garnered ferocious opposition from several quarters, including from several prominent historians and a group of black public intellectuals at the Woodson Centre who established an alternative "1776 Project."[110] And it prompted conservative Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) to introduce a "Saving American History Act" to Congress, seeking to reduce funding to any school that taught the 1619 Project in its classroom.[111] Despite the production of educational materials, Hannah-Jones answered critics by asserting that "the 1619 Project is not a history . . . The project has always been as much about the present as it is the past." Nevertheless, the editor of the American Historical Review published an editorial in support of the 1619 Project, condemning the handful of historians who had criticized it.[112] That professional historians have been dragged into a public fight that leaves little space for nuance and complexity is largely a result of their own embrace of presentism. The mappings of position over the founding are driven by the needs of the present and not by the truths of the past. Within the culture wars, these positions have become rigid and diametrically opposed: they refuse Jefferson's claim that Americans are brethrens of principle; all republicans *and* all federalists.[113]

The bifurcation of historical memory about the American revolution continues apace, so that the founding now works to divide rather than unite the nation. There is no sense in which historians should, or even could, reproduce the unifying national myths that used to animate history-writing. There is certainly no need to paper over cracks or minimise the horrors that past generations of slaves or free but oppressed African Americans faced either before, during or after the Revolution. There is,

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[109] Leslie M. Harris, "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me." *Politico* (03/06/2020) https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248 [accessed 9/7/2020]

[110] Much of the debate, including interviews with signatories to a letter to the *New York Times* challenging much of the factual content, is hosted on the World Socialist Web Site: https://www.wsws.org/en/topics/event/1619/Letter from Historians; Historians Sean Wilentz, James Mcpherson, James Oakes, Victoria Bynum, and Gordon Wood signed the letter. The Robert L. Woodson centre brings together black conservative and liberal thinkers Some of the high-profile academics include Carol M. Swain, Glenn Loury, Jason D. Hill, Wilfred Reilly, Shelby Steele, John McWhorter, and John Sibley Butler and journalists Coleman Hughes and Clarence Page.

[111] Tom Cotton, "Saving American History Act 2020" 116th Congress, 2nd Session. https://www.cotton.senate.gov/files/documents/200723%20Saving%20American%20History%20Act.pdf [accessed 27 July 2020]

[112] Nicole Hannah-Jones, https://twitter.com/nhannahjones/status/1287741964876746755?s=20. Tweeted on 27 July, 20202. Alex Lichtenstein, "From the Editor's Desk: 1619 and All That" *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 125.1 (February 2020): xv–xxi. https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhaa041

[113] Thomas Jefferson "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1801. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states/peaceful-transition.html [accessed 9 May 2020]

however, a need for a history that understands how change happens; there is a need for a sense of the future. As historian James Oakes explained in his response to the 1619 Project, the notion of racism as an "original sin", or as being built into the DNA of America

> are really dangerous tropes. They're not only ahistorical, they're actually anti-historical. The function of those tropes is to deny change over time . . . Nothing changes. There has been no industrialization. There has been no Great Migration. We're all in the same boat we were back then. And that's what original sin is. It's passed down. Every single generation is born with the same original sin. And the worst thing about it is that it leads to political paralysis. It's always been here. There's nothing we can do to get out of it. If it's the DNA, there's nothing you can do.[114]

With the understanding of timelessness promulgated in the culture wars – of founding fathers as either saints or sinners and the revolution as either essential or irrelevant to national existence – there is a disjuncture between the categories of experience and expectation that Hartog outlines as being crucial to a present that connects to both past and future. There is, in effect, no historical time. How do we get beyond this impasse?

The power of Miranda's artistic vision is, in fact, that it manages to speak to both sides of the culture wars: his creative vision unifies, and it reintroduces change over time. *Hamilton* uses the cues from America's political culture to hold a mirror up to the nation. Everyone sees something to like. Miranda's optimism, energy and passion and his focus on aspirational immigrants lead him to embrace the positive elements of foundational values in a way that few liberals have done in recent memory. Indeed, in an early performance of the opening song at Obama's White House, the president's embarrassed laughter signals his discomfort with the theme. While Obama squirms, Miranda reaches back into the past and pulls out Alexander Hamilton as a happening hip-hop hero who has a million things to do – just you wait! Miranda makes the founding fathers cool again, and without irony. Unsurprisingly and perhaps with the flattering recognition that Miranda's version of Hamilton's politics holds up a mirror to his own, Obama quickly got on board and even came to voice a Hamildrop version of the song based on Washington's Farewell Address (One Last Time, 44 Remix).[115]

As Americans forage in their history, searching for a lost common identity, Miranda's *Hamilton* offers some psychic ease. Beyond the black lives/all lives position-staking of the culture wars, Miranda shows us that the particular and the universal can complement one another. Even over the

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[114] Tom Makamen, "An interview with historian James Oakes on the New York Times' 1619 Project." *World Socialist Website* (18 November, 2019) https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/11/18/oake-n18.html [accessed 30 September 2020]

[115] Christopher Jackson, Barack Obama, Bebe Winans, "One Last Time (44 Remix)" (Dec 20, 2018) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFEL_0UFgIs&feature=youtu.be [accessed 19 July, 2019] Cultural critic Chris Cutrone has noted that if Alexander Hamilton serves the current neoliberal moment as proxy for Obama, racist Jefferson is a proxy for Trump. See his excellent "The Jeffersonian American Revolution" Platypus Affiliated Society, hosted on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-kXCBTvxrE&feature=youtu.be [accessed 28 July 2020]

contentious issue of slavery, *Hamilton* presents a complex picture that allows for both agency and obstacles: from the determined idealism of John Laurens, a slave-owning planter's son who sought to raise an army of slaves to fight for both their own freedom and freedom from Britain; to the careless hypocrisy of Thomas Jefferson, a statesman of great principle with a slave-owning Achilles heel. After the victory of Yorktown,

> black and white soldiers wonder alike if this really means freedom.
> Not yet.[116]

On the Mixtape album, Miranda adds a third cabinet rap battle between Jefferson and Hamilton over the question of slavery, recognised as "a stain on the soul of democracy" but which finds no resolution. The song ends: "let's hope the next generation thinks of something better."[117] Similarly, Angelica Schuyler is keen to have Jefferson include women in the sequel to the Declaration. Miranda's open-ended "pursuit of happiness" gives the nation a future, despite its dark past.

Conclusion

The debate about the American revolution and the national founding is central to the crisis of national identity the United States is experiencing today. US founding myths connect Americans together by shared ideas and beliefs rather than by ethnicity or national origin. These ideas require a collective memory to sustain them. A patriotic national identity never went out of style for many ordinary Americans and, in each generation, immigrants to the US have breathed new life into enlightened foundational values. Second generation immigrants like Miranda are both insiders and outsiders, self-consciously American while reinventing and reimagining American ideals and traditions for their group and generation. Miranda uses *Hamilton* to defend immigration as an integral part of US history and as a celebration of the nation created by the founders. Philip Kasinitz compares Miranda's use of musical theatre to those Jewish immigrants who made Broadway an imaginative space in which to explore the juxtaposition of their insider/outsider identities and to lay claim to the nation; "as newcomers and outsiders assert[ing] that this American story belongs to them as much as to anyone."[118] In bringing hip-hop street culture to the American founding, Miranda reinvigorates and transforms American identity.

Nevertheless, most historians understand that their role is no longer to encourage Americans to cling to national myths. There might, however, be space for a recognition that the kindling of hope for the future minimizes the public's need for a comforting past. In any case, historians need not constantly feed the anxieties of the present using the past as a proxy. In order to survive and expand, the

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116 Original Broadway Cast of Hamilton, "*Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)*" (2015) track 20.
117 Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Cabinet Battle 3 (Demo)" *The Hamilton Mixtape* (2016) track 19.
118 Philip Kasinitz, "Immigrants! We Get the Job Done! Newcomers remaking America on Broadway" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42:6 (January, 2019): 883-900.

historical imagination requires a vision for both past and future. Historians' currently intense attention to the present as the primary temporal referent displaces the past and removes the future as a guide to action. Allowing a sense of continuity (in terms of a chronological timeline) and contingency (in terms of the constantly changing context of events) in historical writing will help to restore faith in both the precedents of the past and the promise of the future.

The boundary between historical truth and historical fiction is blurry and complicated. Historical fiction like Miranda's *Hamilton* speaks truth on a number of levels; that is, it celebrates specific value-laden truths rooted in current preoccupations with identity and belonging. But it also expands upon universal human truths about freedom, equality and the transformative power of ideas and human action in history. This is the central reason for its massive popularity across the political spectrum. In its willingness to speak about both the heroism and the limitations of the nation's founders, *Hamilton* demonstrates a respect for its audience and their ability to accept the contradictions of blighted heroes and imperfect unions.

The question that the founders confronted still troubles American democracy: how to reconcile minorities' claims to justice with the demands and interests of a democratic majority.[119] However good it is, a musical about Alexander Hamilton will not solve that continuing problem. But it may signal a cultural opening, a creative imagining of a better future and, possibly, that the end of the end of history glimmers on the horizon. Historians might learn from all this that their audience does not constantly need reminding of the inescapable tragedies of the past and the unavoidable terrors of the future. Who better to resist Hartog's presentism than historians, who have an investment and a responsibility to keep history – if not the mythical past – alive. A form of mass entertainment *must* engage the emotions and identities of its audience; historians can and should, indeed must, offer something different to and better than this constant mesmerising present. Who tells your story, it turns out, does matter.

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