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CHAPTER 32

'WHO TELLS YOUR STORY'

A Reflection on Race-Conscious Casting and the Musical

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C32P1 *This chapter was developed as a personal reflection from my position as a mixed-race person of Black heritage in the United Kingdom. My conceptualisation of the state of casting in the global musical is situated in this context. It is important to recognise that our conversations about casting, belonging, and representation vary in different cultures and countries, and in the local politics of expression through writing and developing work for stage and screen. This chapter is presented as a snapshot of the discussions around equitable casting where I am: one of the conspicuously few queer people of colour researching identity and musicals in the UK and US context.*

C32S1

Who Tells Your Story

C32P2 Whenever I am asked to comment on questions of representation or diversity in musical theatre, I begin with this lyric from Lin-Manuel Miranda's megamusical *Hamilton* (2015):

C32P3 Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
C32P4 When I was young and dreamed of glory
C32P5 You have no control
C32P6 Who lives, who dies, who tells your story.[1]

C32P7 In this scene, George Washington warns the protagonist, Alexander Hamilton, that it is fruitless to attempt to control how we are remembered or how our legacies will be maintained. Simultaneously, the content and casting of *Hamilton* challenge us to consider whose histories are preserved in music, in education, and in popular consciousness. There is something exciting and ironic in the textual layers of this musical. The

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plot shows Hamilton attempting to control his narrative and to create a new history for an independent America, while others (e.g. Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr) are represented as attempting to interrupt and undo his work. This musical has skyrocketed an already popular musical theatre creative, Lin-Manuel Miranda, to superstardom, with *Hamilton* regularly bookmarked by critics and creatives as form-changing. Many of the accolades attributed to *Hamilton* include the visibility of a cast predominantly made up of actors of colour. The musical shows us the possibility of representation while highlighting the historical absence of people of colour in accounts of American history *and* in the leading casts of American musicals.

C32P8 The irony I allude to comes in several forms. Miranda has become the leading voice for 'diverse' representation on stage and screen, even though *Hamilton* does not foreground the people of colour alive when the history took place. Both *Hamilton* and the screen adaptation of *In the Heights* (2021) have been criticised for 'colourism', including erasing and mistreating Black actors involved in telling the stories.[2] In a co-authored think piece on *In The Heights*, *New York Times* reviewers reflected on how the film uses 'language of community celebration and the cultural history of the actual neighborhood of Washington Heights [also known as Little Dominican Republic] to market the film' while erasing dark-skinned Afro-Latinx people from the main cast.[3] This connection is significant because most Dominicans are descended from Africans, and this community is not represented in the named cast of the film. When the director, Jon M. Chu, was challenged about the lack of dark-skinned actors, he responded: 'In the end, you know, when we were looking at the cast, we tried to get the people who were best for those roles.'[4] Chu and Miranda's casting choices were initially defended by the Puerto Rican musical theatre star Rita Moreno, most famous for her portrayal of Anita in *West Side Story* (1961). On *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* on 16 June 2021, Moreno asked Colbert if they could discuss the criticisms of Miranda and *In the Heights*, arguing:

> C32P9 You can never do right, it seems. This is the man who has literally brought Latinoness and Puerto Rican-ness to America. I couldn't do it! I mean I would love to say I did but I couldn't. Lin-Manuel has done that, really, singlehandedly and I am thrilled to pieces. [. . .]
>
> C32P10 I'm simply saying can't you just wait a while and leave it alone? There's a lot of people who are *puertorriqueño* who are also from, uh, Guatemala, who are dark and who are also fair. We are all colours in Puerto Rico, and this is how it is. And I just—it would be so nice if they hadn't come up with that and left it alone, just for now. I mean, they are really attacking the wrong person.[5]

C32P11 After her comments, Colbert quickly changes the subject, and the following day Moreno took to Twitter following the public backlash to her comments to say that she was 'disappointed' with herself for being 'clearly dismissive of Black lives that matter in our Latin community.'[6] She continues with the particularly insightful words, 'It is so easy to forget how celebration for some is lament for others.'

C32F1 **FIG. 32.1** Rita Moreno discussing and defending the casting of *In the Heights* (2021) on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* in June 2021. Photo: Scott Kowalchyk/CBS © Getty Images.

C32P12 Across the two musicals, we are forced to wrestle with artistic license, fantasy, and new ways of seeing the world while knowing that the creatives involved repeatedly perpetuate anti-Blackness in their work. This can be seen in the *In the Heights* film where anti-Black racism is removed from the plot of the stage musical to add to the utopian feel of the screen adaptation. Meanwhile, there is something undeniably uncomfortable about watching the Disney + recording of *Hamilton* or listening to the original Broadway cast album and hearing Miranda spit out the line 'We know who's really doing the planting' in 'Cabinet Battle #1' to Daveed Diggs's Thomas Jefferson.[7] Diggs (African American) is known for his creative work, including the track 'The Deep' critiquing anti-Blackness in America.

C32P13 There are similar criticisms of the score for Disney's *Moana* (2016), for which Miranda co-wrote most of the songs. In this film based on a Polynesian myth, indigenous performers are present only when voicing ancestors or talking about tradition. Moana's 'princess song' ('How Far I'll Go') is completely detached from these performers and from the tonality, language, and performance styles they bring to the film. In the number 'We Know the Way' (a song about the seafaring background of Moana's people), the lyrics—in English—are performed by Miranda himself, moving the translated text away from the actors of indigenous heritage who had been cast. (It is interesting that, in the sing-along versions of *Moana*, the lyrics in Samoan and Tokelauan are neither transcribed nor offered in translation.)

C32P14 Our conversation about who gets to be in musicals must always revolve around who is granted power and agency. In the song 'History Has Its Eyes on You', from which Washington's warning (quoted above) is taken, we learn about the massacre that preceded his military fame. There is an uncomfortable parallel between this violence in the song and the burgeoning changes in American and British musical theatre casting practices. Our 'progress' sits against many structural racisms which retain and enforce derogatory racial coding in characters of colour while also allowing productions to erase 'non-whiteness' altogether. In *Buy Black: How Black Women Transformed US Popular Culture*, Aria S. Halliday explains that

C32P15 > [t]he argument that marginalized people make for greater inclusion as a response to historical erasure is usually made at the level of visibility, partially because finally seeing ourselves communicates some level of inclusion in the mainstream. We recognize the process of interpolation that happens through language and images daily and, therefore, argue that seeing ourselves is important to societal acceptance.[8]

C32P16 Therefore, our discussions about representation in casting are defined by previous violence against performers of colour in musical theatre productions gone by. There is a tension for those of us seeking (and evaluating) change: in order to be seen we must belong, yet belonging to a majority group often requires us to modify who we are or to embrace a kind of cultural absenteeism where the person we are 'at home' is not who we are 'in public'. This morphing of self is intersectional. It can have manifold repercussions for LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially for those members of our communities who present as overtly queer or can be read as presenting in specific ways.

C32P17 I have deliberately begun with examples from *Hamilton*, *In the Heights*, and *Moana* to remind us that three widely celebrated examples of 'inclusive' work continue to provoke the same questions as are being asked about the 'classic' musical. How do people of colour become visible in works that are not created to include us or are produced to represent majority white communities first? If musicals are fantasies, does this mean that our lived experiences are irrelevant or that we simply do not exist in an ideal world? Does this utopia require that an inclusive Latinx community not include dark-skinned, African-descended people? That princesses only communicate in American pop ballad songs? That our historical connections to our nationalities are rendered invisible to the extent that we no longer exist? Performers and audiences of colour are caught in a conundrum: wishing to be seen, to be represented, in positive and aspirational ways (addressing other underlying historical misrepresentations of our communities), and to also exist as holistically and messily as white performers. What is appropriate, 'believable', or in fact *authentic* is seldom determined by creative teams who have shared characteristics with their cast members of colour; therefore, on some level, we are still grappling for the right to be seen on any terms.

C32P18 It is important to note that this discussion of musical theatre is situated in the wider context, in which opera—musical theatre's cognate form—continues to embrace 'historically informed' or 'prestige' performance practices, including casting white actors as

Black, Brown, and Asian characters. For example, the world-renowned soprano Anna Nebtreko has continued to perform the eponymous role of Aida, an Ethiopian princess captured and enslaved by the king of Egypt, in blackface; Nebtreko describes her critics as 'low class'.[9] Similarly, the world-renowned Bolshoi Theatre has said that it will not ban or remove racialised make-up from its productions.[10] Indeed, in 2015 there was surprise that a new production of *Otello* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York elected *not* to have the Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko wear dark make-up to play the Black main character.[11] However, this decision by the Met was itself framed as 'color-blind casting, which allows the best singers to perform any role, regardless of their racial background.'[12] While the conditions of musicals are different, it's important to recognise that in a major opera house, 'color-blind' casting is being used to justify traditional casting methods rather than to engage representative or diverse communities of singers on their stage.

C32P19 There are similar social complexities for productions of musicals in European countries beyond the United Kingdom, which have their own thorny histories of racism. For example, blackface is not uncommon in European theatres, where Black performers are deemed to be 'less available'. This strikes me as especially ironic given that the original migration of American musicals to European opera houses, instigated by Marcel Prawy at the Vienna Volksoper in 1956, relied on bringing in local swing and dance bands to train the orchestras and on flying in African American singers, including Olive Moorefield and William Warfield, to lead transfer productions. Even while Anglophone musical theatre has contrived to mask the threads of minstrelsy in its development (e.g. music written for 'coon shouting' predates the 'Broadway belt' as we know it now), it has also erased the presence of artists of colour in securing its global popularity.

C32P20 Because of my unique situation, my eyes turn first to the conditions faced by Black people and nomadic communities. However, these trends of invisibility and stereotyping apply widely to the representation of Jewish and Asian characters, who are all too often depicted negatively in musicals that have survived through absent race consciousness, apologies for outdated content that is now 'canonical', and a lack of empowering material available for performers from marginalised backgrounds in Europe and America. However, many of these questions are challenged when we displace the Global North from the centre of the musical theatre universe. For example, we do not see the name of the producer Bolanle Austen-Peters represented broadly in conversations on the contemporary musical at our conferences in the Global North, and yet her production company has staged five original musicals centring Nigerian stories and performers. Meanwhile, the Abuja Metropolitan Music Society (AMEMUSO) presented the first Nigerian-produced performance of *Les Misérables* during their annual festival, Operabuja, in November 2021. Hosted in an events room at a Hilton hotel, this production transcends some of the limits we place on representative or 'landmark' performances when monumentalising particularly successful works. Meanwhile, the musical director Ayo Ajayi has been at the heart of numerous Nigerian Broadway-style musicals, including *Saro the Musical* (2014), *Wakaa the Musical* (2016), and *OMG the Musical* (2021). These Nigerian productions feature entirely or predominantly Black

performers and creative teams. In a global majority country, musical theatre belongs to the creatives and cast that make it. However, we are confronted with very different conditions in the Global North, and especially in the United Kingdom and United States. The myth that we have no control over who tells our story is broadly disproven. Yet the dominant ideology that allows white performers to access almost any role in the repertoire is in stark contrast with the experience of performers of colour, who must fight for lead roles or even to be present in performance without having their race noted in the marketing and publicity for productions.

C32S2

Visibility in Absence

C32P21 Phenotypic or biological constructs of race have been fundamentally disproven, and yet, it is impossible not to recognise that musicals deploy superficial understandings of racial identity in all contexts. Confused and uncomfortable challenges about authenticity arise. In some ways, colour-blind casting was introduced to overcome these difficulties, removing the conversation entirely and assuming that an actor of any background can inhabit any role if they are the most able. Disney's 1997 film adaptation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* remains a best-practice example of this system in action. The king and queen (Victor Garber and Whoopi Goldberg) are of different races to each other, as well as to Paolo Montalban, who plays their son. The fantasy is not disrupted through this casting because it is precisely that: a total fantasy. Meanwhile, colour-conscious casting—where the race of the actor is featured in the work's narrative—has also allowed several experimental ways of embodying identity. *Hamilton*, often wrongly labelled 'colour-blind', deliberately focuses on the personal characteristics of the actors who personify the roles. This can be hugely empowering (and one may laud *Hamilton* for allowing actors to feel seen), but we can also see how it embodies the same principles as traditional casting when characters of colour are played by performers with similar characteristics in every production. We must be careful not to confuse works that deliberately explore or consider a performer's or character's identity to make a show communicate its content sensitively with material in which a character is merely designated a race. Where *Hamilton* initially cast people of similar racial backgrounds in the same roles (e.g. Eliza was of Asian heritage, Angelica was a Black woman, and Peggy/Maria was of Black or mixed Black heritage), the characteristics of those roles also had, and encouraged, racial coding.

C32P22 The broader conversation about who gets to play what roles resonates throughout the performing arts. For example, there has been debate about the trend of casting Black British actors, including Kingsley Ben-Adir, Cynthia Erivo, Daniel Kaluuya, and David Oyelowo as prominent African American icons, including Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman, on film.[13] In an article defending Kaluuya's casting as the Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in *Judas and the Black Messiah*, Silva Chege reflects:

C32P23 To limit actors to playing roles that match their birth certificates disadvantages both audiences and performers. It denies us the magic of seeing on-screen transformations take place. While it is natural for tension to rise over who gets what of the few prestigious roles on offer, considering how rare it is for Black people—British and American—to be given the space to tell their stories, divisions and fractures in the diaspora only serve to minimise the collective voice and make it easier to ignore. The reality is that a win for one group of Black people is a win for all its diverse communities across the globe.[14]

C32P24 I can imagine that critics of diverse casting will make a direct comparison between Chege's words and Moreno's. ? How is Moreno's call for pan-ethnic support of Puerto Rican representation different to Chege's defense of Black diasporic solidarity? [15] In this instance, films about Black icons are few and far between, and there are stark contrasts in industry attitudes to films such as the Black-produced *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021) and the Oscar-winning *Green Book*, which includes a white saviour figure who continues to be racist despite the friendship he develops with his Black client. In *Green Book*, we access the white spectator who perceives racial difference rather than following the life of a the world-renowned pianist Don Shirley (a Black, queer man).. Musicals such as *The King and I* and *Hairspray* (2002) (among others) use a similar device. Meanwhile the actors named in Chege's paragraph are all darker-skinned Black actors who are seldom offered romantic and/or heroic leads in multiracial films. Moreno's comments on *In The Heights* respond to the erasure of extant communities, whereas Chege is reflecting on the paucity of roles for dark-skinned Black actors across the whole repertoire.

C32P25 In a group interview about the film *Fences* (2016), based on August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize–winning play, Denzel Washington responded to a question about 'needing a Black director' by highlighting the power of shared cultural experience: 'It's not color, it's *culture*'.[16] He continued: 'I know, you know, we all know what it is when a hot comb hits your hair on Sunday morning. What it smells like. That's a cultural difference, not just a colour difference.' The group he is addressing continues to laugh about the distinctive hiss of the comb, and he highlights how there's an immediate commonality between him and the other cast members present because this is something recognisable and resonant to most people who grew up with and around Afro-textured hair. In musicals, traces of this cultural bond are exceptionally hard to find and make such utopian imaginings such as *In the Heights*, Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and Disney/Pixar's *Soul* (2020), in which the Black heroes are dehumanised as a frog and the lost soul of a dead pianist, more bittersweet.

C32P26 In the UK context, cultural bonding is essential to musical theatre representation because we are so limited in our understanding of community. While a Black British or Asian British actor is judged on their appearance before their nationality, regardless of how many generations their ancestors have lived in the United Kingdom, colour-blind casting is not only out of reach, it is also dangerous. Television series such as *The Crown* and Andrew Garfield's appearance as the musical theatre composer Jonathan Larson in

the Netflix film *Tick Tick . . . Boom!* perpetuate the need for physical approximation when playing a historical figure. Meanwhile, this pressure to mimic physical appearances insidiously requires racial authenticity that facilitates ahistorical fictionalisations of British society. Therefore, only musicals such as *& Juliet* and Moss and Harlow's *SIX* allow people of colour to be consistently seen and heard in a historicised setting. Yet, these shows are unified by representing mock-Tudor settings through spectres of contemporary pop icons such as Beyoncé, Adele, and Ariana Grande, or by using a jukebox score of music by other pop artists, including Britney Spears and Katy Perry. As such, people of colour can only be seen in musicals set 'then' if presented through 'now' (a bastardisation of Lin-Manuel Miranda's 'America then through America now' description of *Hamilton*). I highlight that while *Hamilton* erases almost all indigenous, enslaved, and freed persons of colour, British musical theatre conceptions of the historical past assume there were no people of colour whatsoever. Miranda chooses not to deal with these themes. Most British musicals pretend they don't exist.

C32P27 This erasure of living people of colour is not historical: the fantasy vehicle *Wicked* (2003) brings this reality to the fore. The musical, drawn from Gregory Maguire's 1995 novel, reimagines the life of the Wicked Witch of the West Elphaba, originally from Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and immortalised by Margaret Hamilton in MGM's film musical *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In the musical, Elphaba is a social outcast amongst her peers for having been born with green skin. For the early scenes of the musical, she is presented as 'different' until she is revealed to have coveted magical powers, which bring her to the attention of the Wizard and his aides, who have nefarious political ambitions for her. Elphaba's oddness is set in contrast to her enemy/best friend counterpart G(a)linda. Glinda is represented (and almost exclusively cast) as a stereotypical white socialite in a bright blonde wig. Her class and social status are connected to her embodiment of a coveted 'ideal' appearance. As a result, Elphaba's otherness, which is framed through her greenness (and not her ability to use magic), has led to an allegorical approach to *Wicked*: Elphaba represents a person of colour.

C32P28 This rationale has been amplified by the casting of Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba in the forthcoming film adaptation. For some, then, the casting of a Black actor in the film adaptation finally confirms that Elphaba's struggle is connected to inhabiting a racialised body. Indeed, many people rejoiced that Erivo and Ariana Grande (cast as Glinda) will provide racial diversity in the inevitably more high-profile screen production than in those seen on European and American stages. And yet, many mistook Grande (who is Italian American) for a woman of colour because of her use of fake tan and subtle cultural appropriations of Blackness in her performance. However, the notion that Elphaba's green skin is a representation of racialised otherness erases all other non-whiteness present in the stage and screen worlds. In fact, it assumes default whiteness—a 'non-racialised' experience—as the marker of contrast. While fantastical, *Wicked*, like *The Wizard of Oz*, is consciously and conceptually American, and yet, any visible performers of colour in *Wicked* are assumed to be absent or subsumed into this imagined racial neutrality against Elphaba as the marginalised, fantastical other.

C32P29 This is also a window into the wider traditions of derogatory impersonations (including those from minstrelsy and orientalist fantasies) that have shaped musicals from *Show Boat* (1927) to *Miss Saigon* (1989). *Wicked* regularly reminds me of the limitations of our imagination in fantasy on the musical theatre stage. While there has been pioneering world-building in literature and film (including Afro-futurism and African futurism), stage musicals continue to generate superficial conflicts. For example, there was speculation about how a Black British actress might embody a blonde character, Elle Woods, in ta new production of *Legally Blonde: The Musical* at London's Open Air Theatre. Similarly, in 2018 a production of the musical in Seattle shared a video announcing a Black Elle Woods, and the comments are littered with conversations about whether it is appropriation for a Black woman to wear a blonde wig in the role,[17] overlooking the fact that Reese Witherspoon (who originated Woods's character and is known for her glowing blonde bob) is a natural brunette. Here we enter the true challenge in our conversations about representation and embodiment on-stage. Musicals *about* Black, Brown, Asian, Indigenous, Roma, Polynesian, and other races *by* creators from our communities have not been funded or allowed to thrive. Therefore, our presence on-stage perpetuates disruption in musicals that are written according to assumptions of whiteness unless there are characters coded as 'other'. Performers of colour are repeatedly forced to interact with the perception of 'difference' to their white counterparts.

C32S3

Somewhere, a Place for Us

C32P30 As I write in early 2022, *West Side Story* has returned squarely to the mainstream with the release of Stephen Spielberg's 2021 film remake. Historically and concurrently, *West Side Story* provides a challenge to the notions of race-conscious and colour-blind casting, as its finished story polarises two different ethnic groups—the reimagined Montagues and Capulets. The knowledge, then, that the creatives of the first production of *West Side Story* originally envisaged the Puerto Rican Sharks as Jewish shows that the specificity of identity was not itself crucial. Only the collision of difference was dramaturgically significant, and it is more intrusive as a modern viewer to realise how racialised exoticism was added to make this conflict more pronounced. This is especially problematic when viewing stills or film of the Puerto Rican characters, darkened with boot polish to embody the racial other. Moreno's comment 'we are all colours in Puerto Rico' feels even more churlish when considering that, in the 1961 Robert Wise film adaptation, everyone is made up to be the same artificial shade of non-white.

C32P31 Spielberg and Kushner's reimagining of *West Side Story* provides some answers to this with changes to the script, song use, and casting. With more believable writing, the Puerto Rican dialogue flip-flops between languages, as many polylingual migrant households do. The film also has a diverse representation of Latinx performers who inhabit the Puerto Rican characters while acknowledging Rita Moreno as a community

elder. In the 2021 film Moreno plays an updated version of the shopkeeper, Doc, who is familiar with all the youth on both sides and is wise concerning their conflicts. By having Moreno there, a person who has really stood next to white actors in brownface pretending to share her heritage, we are reminded of the past and of what *West Side Story* has been. There is a different gravitas to her spectatorship of the musical's violence because many audience members know that Moreno has actually seen it all before. It is therefore all the more joyful to see her in company with the film's cast at the Sitzprobe of the song 'America', for which she is perhaps best known.[18]

C32P32

Nevertheless Moreno's amplification of Ariana DeBose, a Black queer Latinx actor who picked up almost every Best Supporting Actress award for her interpretation of Anita, contrasts with her spontaneous choice to criticise Black people who saw colourism in *In the Heights*. This essay does not intend to make Moreno the villain of the piece. She is a complicated figure who is in no way responsible for the conditions of the global entertainment industry. However, she highlights the challenge that no person of colour (myself included) can represent everyone else. The contrast in her attitudes to the celebrating of Ariana DeBose and her insistence that Black Latinx critics should wait their turn to be represented reminds us of the multifaceted problems we face in discussions about casting and 'belonging' in the stage and screen musical. Moreno is comfortable referring to *In the Heights* critics as 'them' (not a part of her community) while also saying that light-skinned Puerto Ricans are part of the fabric of representation too. This is true, but her open disdain for colourist critique in the original interview

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FIG. 32.2 Ariana DeBose (Anita) and David Alvarez (Bernardo) lead the Latinx performers of Steven Spielberg's 2021 *West Side Story* remake in the number 'America'. Photo © Alamy Stock Photo.

reminds us that figures such as Moreno and Miranda occupy space as the only visible exemplars of a marginalised community, saying, 'Look, some of us are here and you should be happy for us.' This implicit attitude constitutes internalised racism that leaves the burden of correction and patience in the hands of the most marginalised while ignoring the privileges that lighter-skinned, 'white-proximate' people of colour enjoy as a result of their superior status in a system of racial distinction determined by darkness of skin tone.

C32S4

On Belonging

C32P33 One of the challenges we face in discussions about progressive casting in musicals is the lack of reflection on what it means to belong. It is possible to enjoy and to participate in a culture without feeling a part of it, so the quest for representation, led by those already represented, continues to ignore what this belonging might mean. Speaking personally, the musical *Been So Long* (especially the 2018 film adaptation) could be described as representing me. It is set minutes away from where I grew up and explores stories about Black British life that echo the experiences of many of the people I love. However, *Been So Long* provides representation at its most superficial, because the script leans into stereotypes of toxic masculinity and 'strong Black women'. At the same time, storytelling through music styles like reggae or hip-hop does not truly find its home in musical theatre as I know it. Lee Hall's jukebox musical *Get Up, Stand Up* (2021), about the life of Bob Marley, is yet another reminder that Black musicians are almost only welcome in biographical settings or film adaptations featuring already-famous popular music. The form does not allow shows by us, for us, to survive, and therefore, when we circle back to who is 'seen' in musicals, we confront a conflict.

C32P34 Until the musical theatre community at large has acknowledged that American and British musicals are steeped in colonial and racist understandings of 'non-white' people and communities (I include anti-Semitic content here), representation in its most ideal form cannot be made good. Ultimately, scholars like me, based in Europe or America, are likely to have internalised Broadway as the basis from which most other musical theatre is derived. Frequently cited examples such as Harold Arlen and Truman Capote's *House of Flowers* (1954), which is an obscure work to most people anyway, do not count. This musical (based on a Capote novella) continues the fractured representation of Blackness of *Porgy and Bess*, with Arlen, like Gershwin, venerating music rooted in experience other than his own. What might the prolific dancer, choreographer, and director Alvin Ailey and/or Geoffrey Holder have achieved in staging a musical that does not fetishise Black Haitians? With the performing talents of Pearl Bailey, Diahann Carrol, and Juanita Hall, where is the landmark musical drama about African American life that we have seen so many times when centred on white American experience? Why was Juanita Hall cast as characters from different racial backgrounds more often than she was offered material where she inhabits her Blackness? The question of

who is appropriate to cast in anything is centred in who wrote the material and who it is for. I do not have an 'own voice' position on the original London cast of *Miss Saigon*, but in the casting of the white British actor Jonathan Pryce as the Eurasian character the Engineer, I recognise the same insidiousness that positions Juanita Hall (who was African American and Irish American) in the roles of the 'Tonkinese' Bloody Mary in *South Pacific* (1949) and Madam Liang in *Flower Drum Song* (1958).

C32P35 Hall inhabits a generalised racial other because those were the only parts available to her. The Engineer has a French father, allowing the casting of a white actor instead of a person of mixed heritage. The point here is not about racial authenticity (which trades in white supremacism) but to focus on who is and is not permitted access to whiteness. Therefore, the first Asian actor to play Christine in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986) or the first Black actor to play Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* is neither my concern nor a valuable yardstick in this conversation. While I would love any actor of colour to inhabit roles traditionally interpreted as white, their casting does not change the conditions in

C32F3 **FIG. 32.3** Scene from Henry Koster's 1961 screen adaptation of *Flower Drum Song*. The film is set among the Chinese American community of San Francisco's Chinatown, but features actors of various ethnic backgrounds and nationalities: Kam Tong (*left*, as Doctor Li) is Chinese American, Juanita Hall (*centre*, as Madame Liang) is of African American and Irish American descent, and Miyoshi Umeki (*right*, as Mei Ling) is Japanese. Photo © Alamy Stock Photo.

which our heroes are never given the lead or presented through our eyes. And the rot goes deeper.

C32P36 A further challenge to this discussion of casting in the West is our persistent belief that all global stories are legitimate subjects for our entertainment. This continues to manifest in musicals about struggle, discrimination, and brutality seen through our cultural lenses. In *Reframing the Musical*, Broderick Chow reflects on the announcement of *Here Lies Love*, a musical about Imelda Marcos: 'The idea of white British audiences happily dancing along to such a recent story of corruption, violence, and brutality was an unbearable prospect. After all, what did they know about Philippine history? Or Filipinos?'[19] Chow encapsulates the weariness and scepticism that we feel when we anticipate one-dimensional representation of our cultures. Musicals in Britain and America continue to rely on the distance of othering to create exotic spectacles out of histories the audience need never properly understand.

C32P37 This reality is made more difficult when we recognise that our most celebrated composers, lyricists, and book writers have repeatedly mangled the stories of people of colour, and that these wrecks of representation have become the templates for the form. I can see the clumsy (if well-meaning) tussles with colonialism in *The King and I* (1951) alongside Yul Brynner's impersonation of a Thai monarch and trace those efforts to modern attempts to grapple with systemic racism in John Kander and Fred Ebb's *The Scottsboro Boys* (2010). One of my most formative memories as a musical theatre fan and researcher was sitting in the middle of the stalls before and during a performance of the West End revival of *Scottsboro*. I had already experienced a micro-aggression: two well-spoken white people behind me had tapped my shoulder to ask if I would tie my hair up or they wouldn't be able to see. The fact that the floor of the stage was above my seated head was irrelevant to them.

C32P38 Like the community Chow highlights, I was one of the people in the London audience who had never heard of the landmark miscarriages of justice that the real Scottsboro Boys were subjected to. I came to the performance knowing it had a majority Black cast and rave reviews. *The Scottsboro Boys* has an experimental format using the structure and styles of vaudeville—a minstrel show—to document the repeated mistrial of nine Black youths who were falsely accused of raping two white women in 1932. Through the show the drama uses cakewalks, blackface, and brazen comedy to repeatedly collide the historical racism the nine experienced with the racist roots of musical theatre spectacles. In the songs, Kander and Ebb explore the abuse, fear, and resilience the boys experienced. They also musicalise their trauma. I can never forget nor forgive sitting in that performance during the song 'Electric Chair'. In accounts of the tortures the boys experienced, it has been reported that the youngest defendant, Leroy Wright, who was thirteen years old, was forced to sleep in the electric chair he was slated to die in. Kander and Ebb construct the horror of this through a nightmare ditty performed by the prison guards, which leads to an 'electrifying' tap dance. A fourteen-year-old actor is forced to sit through lyrics like 'your hair fizzles out and your eyes disappear' before dancing a short tap spectacle accented by 'shocks'.[20] The audience laughed around me. It was not uncomfortable laughter. It was mirth. They acknowledged how 'clever' the material

is and applauded it. The disconnect between laughing at gallows humour and the real danger our legal and policing structures continue to pose to Black people in both the United Kingdom and the United States weighed heavily on my mind. It still does, many years on. This audience, almost entirely white presenting, had access to social agency that allowed 'Electric Chair' to be funny, rather than a grotesque misjudgement of the very real consequences that Black people face in our criminal justice systems today.

C32P39 While it might feel easy to absolve Kander and Ebb, and along with the director, Susan Stoman, of the conditions of the audience experience, they chose to create an environment in which a young dancer is given the spotlight through appalling circumstances. Stroman writes on her website:

C32P40 > *The Scottsboro Boys* still resonates today as we struggle to give voice to those who are marginalized. For all of us who created the show, it remains the most rewarding musical experience of our lifetime. We know this musical starts a necessary conversation with each audience member and, more importantly, every time it plays, it brings the Scottsboro Boys back to life.[21]

C32P41 I am yet to be convinced that 'Electric Chair' achieves a balance between communicating the fear and horror of the conditions that Black youth experience in the American (and British) carceral systems and employing the spectacle of musical theatre to shock. This is important, because the 'shock' and discomfort are felt differently by spectators for whom these lived realities are distant and impersonal. The collision of genre, impact, and intention suggest, as does Stroman's reflection, that this is a musical written to remind those who are able to ignore and forget.

C32P42 Looking beyond this specific example, there is a broader conversation to be had about what is written and produced in musical theatre that enables inequality. If we accept that, for musical theatre to be a form, it must have recognisable conventions and rules, then we must look at why these qualities have enabled so many white fantasies, including stereotypes and grotesques of non-white lives. While there are some modest explorations of Jewish stories, there is almost no place for 'own voice' musical theatre in the history of its most popular shows around the world. Even *The Lion King*, which might be written up as a triumph for Black representation in a different context, does not offer much to inspire in terms of creative voice or Black capitalism. It is not Black people or even Black Africans that profit from the global franchise of the *Lion King* stage musical. By acknowledging that there are expectations of dramaturgy and storytelling that we compare work against,[22] we can unpack how roles (and works) are situated. For example, where the Broadway musical is our foundation, we have conceptualisations of an establishing song that introduces all the characters (e.g. 'Another Op'nin', Another Show' from *Kiss Me, Kate* [1948] and 'In the Heights' from *In the Heights* [2008]) or the gendered ballad of unrequited love (e.g. 'Losing My Mind' from *Follies* [1971], 'On My Own' from *Les Misérables* [1985], and 'I'm Not That Girl', from *Wicked*). With that understanding, we can then reflect on who is introduced: if Black and brown actors are in the chorus but do not carry named roles, are they recognised in the establishing song, or

do they remain in servile-proximate roles to be seen and support anonymously? Where we see an up-tempo love song like 'Love You I Do' inhabited by a fat Black woman in the film adaptation of *Dreamgirls* (2006), it is striking that Effie White is not permitted this joy on-stage. With the exception of 'I Enjoy Being a Girl' from *Flower Drum Song* and to a much lesser extent 'I Feel Pretty' from *West Side Story*, we do not have historical precedents that allow women of colour to perform empowered romantic and sensual expression in stage musicals.

C32P43 Songs like 'Helpless' and 'Satisfied' in *Hamilton* seem to provide an antidote to this concern, giving the two female leads, Angelica and Eliza Schuyler, their own musical turns. These heroines (always performed by women of colour) are lively and vivacious, and yet, these songs (two angles on Hamilton's courtship and marriage to Eliza) also highlight their limited interventions in *Hamilton* more generally. Angelica and Eliza's commanding musical presences in *Hamilton* have almost no relevance to the main plot or themes of the show. The single 'First Burn', released as part of the 2018 'Hamilton's Hamildrops', is a first draft of Eliza's broken-hearted ballad 'Burn' after Hamilton publishes the details of his affair to avoid being falsely accused of fraud. In 'First Burn', Eliza is allowed a more fiery, feisty representation of the pain and rage she feels; she is afforded greater insight into her husband's character.[23] Sadly, this thread is diluted in the musical, so that Eliza and Angelica are defined by their love for Hamilton and their role in continuing his legacy. With Effie White in *Dreamgirls*, we see independent and emotional growth through the fall and rise of her career. Eliza and Angelica have no space to develop even though they provide brief moments of on-stage euphoria.

C32S5

How Can We Act?

C32P44 This chapter can only touch on a handful of approaches to representation in musicals presented around the world. However, I hope to encourage all interested parties to pay attention to who is around you and which musicals are repeatedly given space and glory. We can no longer accept that fetishising Global South, non-white, and/or non-Anglophone communities is acceptable in the works we stage, and we must consider thoughtfully the power of revival in musical theatre hubs in different regions. Where Broadway and West End musicals become international sensations, we should learn from staging practices in different locations. We must also look out for musicals like *The Wiz* (1975), which enable empowered performance, but note that transfers to major cities are in conflict with the licences given to small venues. Meanwhile, corporate strategies of organisations like Disney, which regularly remove 'locally sensitive' material from their films, have provided a subconscious filter of bigotry about which audiences will accept musicals on certain themes, which is then reflected back in casting biases. For example, sensitivities about distributing queer scenes in Asia are completely contradicted by domestic productions of *Everybody's Talking about Jamie* (2017) and *Kinky Boots* (2013) in South Korea and Japan. Here we are reminded that blanket labels

obscure the nuances of local environments. We are also reminded that the racial biases of our societies do not translate beyond our supposed borders. This means that a production of *Everybody's Talking about Jamie* that only stars Asian British performers would have different significance to a UK audience to having an all-Korean cast in the original South Korean production. In Britain, we continue to talk about adapting musicals like *Jamie* and *Billy Elliot* to allow performers of colour to inhabit roles that were originally conceived as white. Yet, it seems only logical that when a work transfers to a location with different majority groups, the identities of these same characters are changed by default. The uncomfortable truth is that in the Global North, it is still common to perceive white characters as *without* race, and therefore to be challenged by performers of colour inhabiting roles without signifiers of race. These signifiers are important because they are used to define characterisation (signposted in lyrics and dialogue) and are often present in the musical, lighting, and costume choices that fix racialised bodies in place while the 'non-racialised' characters can be mobile.

C32P45 I began with a quote from *Hamilton*, 'You have no control/Who lives, who dies, who tells your story,' because it simultaneously highlights the way the passing of time changes history and gives weight to the lie that we have no control over what is said and remembered about us. As the earlier examples from Nigeria show, it is completely possible to write popular and commercial musicals with creative teams entirely from the community they centre. In countries where colonialism has been central to the development of our performing arts, this elicits a pressing question: *who is community*? While anti-Semitism abounds in the UK political system and continues to appear in stereotyped representations of Jewishness on-stage, we can and should hand over control of musicals such as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Falsettos* to creative teams who know and understand the cultures they are presenting. This does not mean that racial and ethnic communities are monolithic. It simply acknowledges that our society is not in a post-racial state where it might be easy to imagine or inhabit the lived experiences of people from different backgrounds to our own.

C32P46 I use the British context to problematise a universal approach to casting and representation in musicals. In the United Kingdom we are unravelling questions about who is allowed to represent Britishness on-stage in a very different climate to other colonial states in the Global North. For example, there was a transitory moment from the mid-1950s to the 1970s in which African American musical theatre stars were able to develop major careers in Europe. Where did the performers who followed these artists go, and why are they not represented in new musicals coming from countries including France and Germany? Meanwhile, we have to acknowledge that our discourse on casting is never far from the personalities involved. For example, the effervescent cast album of *Wakaa, the Musical* was made more complex by the allegations of sexual abuse directed at the producer and recording artist Brymo (also known by his name, Ọláwálé Ọlọ́fọọ̀rọ̀) in 2020.[24] In this case, Global North scholars might resist discussing the project at all without recognising how many unsavoury truths are hidden in the musical theatre histories of our countries. Casting is informed by who is seen performing. If we do not recognise the musical works developed outside of Europe and the United States,

then we underpin what a musical is with this absence. You may feel inspired to chant 'we cannot be what we cannot see', and I hope you understand this expression in its fullness.

C32P47 Inclusive casting does not mean 'racially accurate' casting. We do not demand that only Vietnamese actors should play Vietnamese characters in *Miss Saigon*. Instead, we argue that the Chinese and Filipino and Asian British and American actors who are pushed into largely sexualised or villainous roles have a right to play the American GI Chris and his wife, Ellen, as well. I can imagine some recoiling from that last sentence, thinking, 'But *Miss Saigon* revolves around racial difference.' *Miss Saigon* recreates the conditions of *Madama Butterfly* and assumes its audience recognises the Americans as 'non-racialised'; they are the neutral that provides contrast with the other. However, inclusive casting demands something more than this superficial transaction. It requires that there be roles that allow all communities to be seen as they are rather than through historical, fictionalised stereotypes. It requires producers, directors, marketing specialists, composers, lyricists, script writers, costume designers, lighting designers, choreographers, critics, *and audiences* to accept that multiracial communities are, in fact, multiracial. In this way, Black, brown, and other communities that are racially othered in the Global North both belong and are recognzed within the visual and social tapestries of our countries on-stage. Meanwhile, works that are consciously about a specific group should be allowed to continue. This means that an all-white cast cannot stage *Hairspray* because the story revolves around visible and engaged members of a Black community who are subjected to racist oppression. It is not for white actors to imagine or inhabit stories about oppressions that their community has never been subjected to. This is doubly significant when (in this instance) Black actors are not able to inhabit roles that have not been defined as racialised.

C32P48 The argument that we must centre 'historically accurate' race representation in musicals tends to come to the fore when a person of colour is given space in a story dominated by whiteness, and yet, there is no reciprocal outrage when white children are cast, for example, as the 'Siamese children' in *The King and I*. In the Global North, we have not begun to reach a post-racial society where power is uncoupled from identity characteristics, including gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and race. Therefore, it is necessary to demand space where our identities and histories have been commodified and restricted for the sake of another community's entertainment. These are the same relics of colonialism that allows 'This Is Me' from *The Greatest Showman* to be an anthem for the oppressed in a film musical that removes almost all the bitter and grim violations P. T. Barnum inflicted on the people he used in his career. Our empowerment can only be enabled in deference to a white saviour, and, should that saviour have unsavoury practices, those should be minimised.

C32P49 It strikes me as a great irony that part of the success of Lin-Manuel Miranda's musicals hinges on the premise that people who are marginalised (or are often unheard and/or unseen) are given voice. In the Global North, we are so starved of stories centred on people of colour in families and wider community that we are almost uncritical about their content. I wonder what the enslaved and indigenous people who suffered at the hands of the founding fathers might feel about their erasure in *Hamilton*. What does it

mean for diverse casting if actual people of colour no longer exist in the narrative being presented? To what extent does *Hamilton*'s aspiration to flip the power balance and 'put [ourselves] back in the narrative' enable the ambition to make musical theatre more inclusive? Does it not present this intention by rendering the past ahistorically? I remember the glow of happiness I felt sitting in the audience of the West End production because I felt in company for the first time; and yet, I grew increasingly worried about the extent to which one musical can be understood as a solution for all problems. We certainly need these bridging works that remind the Global North that our narratives can be as entertaining and even as commercial as yours. But we are still in a place where musicals written in languages other than English are seldom transferred or adapted while works such as *Phantom*, *Wicked*, and *Sweeney Todd* (1997) are transferred around the world. I believe that opening our imaginations about who is in community with us is foundational to changing which stories are given space. Casting is important in this task because it challenges audiences and markets. We crave belonging, and we crave new understanding. While musicals remain a form of escapism, we cannot allow this to mask the harm they may do to people whom we are not used to seeing. Empowered representation does not dismantle such masking unless you aspire to a society of people who are in no way different from you.

Notes

1. Lin-Manuel Miranda, 'History Has Its Eyes On You', from *Hamilton: Original Broadway Cast Album*, performed by Alex Lacamoire, Christopher Jackson, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and original Broadway cast, 2015, streaming audio, Spotify, accessed 1 February 2022.
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6. Rita Moreno, 'I'm Incredibly Disappointed with Myself', tweet, 17 June 2021, https://twitter.com/TheRitaMoreno/status/1405322954062376964?s=20&t=BDrox_QSHCCCMX_C237vBg, accessed 28 March 2022.
7. Miranda, 'History Has Its Eyes On You'.
8. Aria S. Halliday, *Buy Black: How Black Women Transformed US Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022), 17–18.
9. Nebtreko has faced criticism for her close relationship with the Russian leader Vladimir Putin and has locked her Instagram (on private settings). Therefore, this chapter does not provide a link to the post (still live) on her page. Her words in the comments have been widely reported, including in Helen Holmes, 'The Met Casts Anna Nebtreko as *Aida* Despite Her Past Controversy in the Role', *Observer*, 13 February 2020, https://observer.com/2020/02/anna-netrebko-aida-met-opera-casting-2020-2021-season-details/, accessed 22 March 2022.
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11. Michael Cooper, 'An *Otello* without Blackface Highlights an Enduring Tradition in Opera', *New York Times*, 17 September 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/arts/music/an-otello-without-the-blackface-nods-to-modern-tastes.html, accessed 22 March 2022.
12. Brakkton Booker, 'Metropolitan Opera to Drop Use of Blackface-Style Make-Up', *NPR*, 4 August 2015, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/08/04/429366961/metropolitan-opera-to-drop-use-of-blackface-style-makeup-in-otello?t=1652969155364, accessed 22 March 2022.
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14. Silva Chege, 'Why Shouldn't Black British Actors Play Americans?', *Little White Lies*, 11 April 2021, https://lwlies.com/articles/daniel-kaluuya-judas-and-the-black-messiah-british-actors-american-roles/, accessed 22 March 2022.
15. It is important to acknowledge that the criticism of *In the Heights* was about Dominican representation and that Moreno is specifically commenting as a Puerto Rican.
16. SiriusXM, 'Denzel Washington: "It's Not Color, It's Culture"; Urban View', 20 December 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ayf8Iny9Eg, accessed 22 March 2022.
17. SBS Australia, 'African-American Woman Cast in Legally Blonde', Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=512924062486247, accessed 31 March 2022.
18. WhatsOnStage, '*West Side Story* Movie: "America" Sitzprobe Performance with Ariana DeBose', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-g5X8SA6p10, accessed 22 March 2022.
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20. John Kander and Fred Ebb, 'Electric Chair', *The Scottsboro Boys: Original Off-Broadway Cast*, CD, Jay Records, 2010, CDJAY 1421.
21. Susan Stroman, 'Note from Stro', *Susan Stroman*, [n.d.], https://www.susanstroman.com/productions/the-scottsboro-boys, accessed 16 May 2022.

22. The musical *Hamilton* is a great example of this: the show's conventional structure is interwoven with innovative use of music and casting. However, the vehicle for innovation is familiar and provides a language of songs and dramatic axes that we understand.
23. Lin-Manuel Miranda, 'First Burn', digital single, performed by Ari Afsar, Julia Harriman, Lexi Lawson, Rachelle Ann Go, and Shoba Narayan, 2018, streaming audio, Spotify, accessed 1 February 2022.
24. The allegations were made via an anonymous Twitter account during a wider exposé of sexual abuse in the Nigerian performing arts scene. Brymo denies all wrongdoing.

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