

Reconsidering, Revising, and Reclaiming History: Neo-slave Narratives and *Hamilton*

“You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter even by a millimeter the way people look at reality, then you can change it.”
– James Baldwin

Gabby Deutsch

Faculty Mentors:

Dr. Allia Griffin
aigriffin@scu.edu

Dr. Amy Lueck
alueck@scu.edu

Table of Contents

Introduction ...	3
Research Problem ...	4-5
Process ...	5
Purpose and Significance of Research ...	5-6
Research Questions ...	6
What Do I Hope to Learn or Takeaway? ...	6-7
Outcomes ...	7
Personal Experience ...	7-8
Conclusion ...	8
Work Timeline ...	8-9
Budget ...	9-10
Bibliography ...	11-12

I. Introduction

In the 21st century, fair, equal, and unpolarized representation in public memory is an idea that scholars, educators, and students alike are calling upon more and more as a necessity in order to grapple with society's largest struggles. And they are correct in making this demand - the who, what, and the way we remember history has legitimate and serious implications for the way in which the histories of different groups are remembered and how members of those groups are treated in their present context. Yet access to history, or I should say access to the dominant and mainstream histories that are widely taught in school curriculums and circulate within widely broadcast and attended discourses, is severely limited to privileged groups. When oppressive or tainted histories are heard and repeatedly enforced, they can be internalized by privileged and oppressed groups. This, in turn, both shapes the way that groups are perceived and treated by themselves and by outsiders.

This tainting or slanting of history rings particularly true when we think back on the history of the United States - especially when we examine the institution of slavery and the Revolutionary Era. The histories that students are taught in school about slavery and of the Revolutionary Era are mitigated, subdued, and slanted versions of reality. This is exemplified by the way the "triangular trade" has been a phrase that often appears in textbooks as a way to talk around the brutal kidnapping and displacement of Africans. When students learn about the Revolutionary Era, they learn about our Founding Fathers as men who should be commended for the values they placed on liberty and freedom. Yet students, teachers, and the media often fail to recognize these men as slaveholders who harbored deep-seated prejudices towards minorities, women, and all people who fell outside of their privileged identity group.

When we fail to recognize the truths of our history, and the truths of men we are taught to admire, we collectively suffer. However, the suffering that comes as a result of these warped and tainted histories is not equally distributed across populations. This suffering falls largely on the backs of people of color. In particular, women of color.

My project is based on the conviction that if we can reconsider, revise, and reclaim histories that have been taught, strengthened, and perpetuated over time, we can *begin* to dismantle structures and systems that continue to marginalize minority groups in the 21st century.

My Canterbury project will look at the ways that the literary genre of neo-slave narratives and the Broadway musical *Hamilton* challenge dominant narratives of history and cultural memory. The literary genre of neo-slave narratives emerged in the 1950's. From a contemporary vantage point, these narratives look at the interconnectedness of the past and present and attempted to reconcile the two. Unlike the authors of slave narratives who wrote around the time of the Civil War, the authors of these contemporary novels are uninhibited by the political and social restraints that limited the authors of slave narratives in the 18th and 19th centuries. In particular, many of these narratives are written from a woman's perspective - a voice that was widely silenced at the time slave narratives were written. *Hamilton* is a musical centered on the life of Alexander Hamilton. With a cast that is both racially and ethnically diverse, the play reimagines the Revolutionary Period and attempts to resituate people of color within that era.

My project will first examine how, and to what extent, these texts are successful in reshaping, reclaiming, and reconsidering history. Then, considering the inherent tie between the past and the present, with history having a tendency to repeat itself (sometimes disguised in different forms or variations), I will analyze the connection between the silencing of marginalized groups, the present day repercussions of that silencing, and the ways in which social movements attempt to alter public memory in order to reshape, reclaim, and reconsider history.

II. Research Problem

Throughout United States history, whose voice had been heard, publicized, accepted, respected above all? Generally, and with few exceptions, the answer to this question is relatively simple: a straight

white, upper-middle class, U.S.-born, and traditionally educated male. By extension, the experience of this prototypical male has constructed and shaped much our knowledge and understanding of U.S. history. But of course this experience is not representative of people outside this privileged and dominant group. In fact, considering the rapidly increasing diversity of the United States, these experiences are only representative of a small fraction of people - both long ago and today. Yet the presentation of history is shaped and created by those who have power over other more marginalized and oppressed groups.

Slave narratives tell of the experiences of displaced and enslaved Africans both in Great Britain's colonies and in the United States. Written predominately by males, these narratives expose the brutal reality of newly freed slaves' enslavements as well as their escapes to freedom. While these narratives, perhaps most popularly *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, were instrumental in influencing the abolitionist movement, political and social constraints limited the authors' abilities to fully convey - without a filter- their experiences. To be clear, in order to be published, an abolitionist had to sponsor the narrative. Although abolitionists clearly were in favor of ending slavery, that did not necessarily mean they were in favor of equality. In other words, abolitionists often sought to end slavery while still maintaining white supremacy. By effect, in writing these narratives the authors portrayed themselves as assimilationist as opposed to revolutionary and addressed their (white, male, and educated) readers as moral and compassionate, and merely ignorant of the realities of slavery. These narratives have led to an incomplete understanding of slavery for more than 150 years. Moreover, these narratives overwhelmingly excluded the voices of women, which in turn portrayed female slaves as either compliant or non-agential. Or, even worse, women were written out of history entirely.

Neo-slave narratives, a genre that emerged in the 1950's, are fictional accounts of slavery that show the enduring legacy of slavery in the latter part of the 20th and 21st centuries. Without the restrictions placed on the authors of slave narratives, the authors of neo-slave narratives are able to more fully grapple with the system of slavery and the legacies of slavery today. In effect, neo-slave narratives, especially those written by women and centered on female protagonists, function to revise, reclaim, and resituate women within a history from which they have largely been excluded.

Hamilton, the wildly popular Broadway play, centers on the life of Alexander Hamilton, an immigrant from the British West Indies. The play is based on historian Ron Chernow's widely respected biography *Alexander Hamilton*. With the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a Grammy, and 11 Tony Awards to its name, there is no doubt that audiences and critics alike are crazy about this play. Why is *Hamilton*, a play that examines the Revolutionary era through the eyes of one of the founding fathers, so popular? Unlike most Broadway plays (Broadway is unofficially nicknamed "Great White Way"), *Hamilton* includes a cast that is almost fully comprised of people of color. With people of color playing the founding fathers and nearly every leading role, the production challenges the predominately white and Eurocentric view of the Revolutionary Period. And through the incorporation of rap and hip-hop music, *Hamilton* allows for the inclusion of other-than-white cultures and influences. In this way, *Hamilton* attempts to re-examine history not only through exposing the narrow views of the founding fathers, but also by showing how the United States (and its history) has been deeply shaped by people of color--though their role has been recognized only rarely.

For my Canterbury project, I will look at the ways in which neo-slave narratives and *Hamilton* are able to reconsider, revise, and reclaim histories where crucial voices and influences are largely ignored, marginalized, or relegated to the margins of our discourse. Through in-depth readings of neo-slave narratives, Ron Chernow's biography *Hamilton*, a viewing of the Broadway production, and substantial theoretical/background readings, I will evaluate the ways in which, and to what extent, these texts are able to reshape and shift understandings of the activity of black women during and after slavery, as well as the role that people of color played in the founding and building of the United States.

III. Process

In order to better understand the circulation of public memory in regards to the founding fathers (particularly Alexander Hamilton) and slavery, I will carefully analyze a variety of U.S. history textbooks to see the version of history that is being presented. These textbooks will help me apprehend what is known, and thus will help me to see the ways in which the texts I have selected add to, alter, or dismantle the histories they present.

In terms of plays, although my focus will be on the ways in which *Hamilton*, due to its relevance, innovativeness, and critical acclaim, attempts to revise, reclaim, and reconsider history, I will read *The Colored Museum* by George Wolfe and *Insurrection: Holding History* by Robert O'Hara as well. Readings of these plays will be used as a way to compare *Hamilton* to notable African-American plays. Both *The Colored Museum* and *Insurrection: Holding History* are plays that challenge the linear model of time, confront stereotypes of African Americans, and make clear the connections between past and present.

The ways that neo-slave narratives and *Hamilton* may reshape our understanding of history are hugely important both to our understanding of the malleability of memory as well to our understanding of the power of art, literature, and theater. Yet both neo-slave narratives, as a genre, and *Hamilton* are relatively new texts that attempt to intervene on histories that over time have been told, strengthened, and perpetuated. Due to the continuity of time and the inability to draw distinct and marked separations between past and present, I will also analyze the effects of the perpetuation of dominant and hegemonic histories in recent years. I will explore the ways in which legacies of these silences have erupted in public spaces in the late 20th century and into the 21st century. I will analyze these legacies of history primarily in terms of pay gaps, (intersectional) sexism, and gendered/racialized lacks of social and economic capital and access.

Social movements have always played an important role in resisting and challenging oppression as well as giving a voice to those who historically have had their voices silenced or negated. Focusing on #SayHerName and #BlackLivesMatter, I will examine the ways in which present-day social movements function as a bridge between the past and the present in an attempt to repeal or account for historical silences. For example, can we understand the #SayHerName movement as rooted in the silencing of the role of female slaves in mainstream history -- particularly in the original slave narratives?

IV. Purpose and Significance of Research

The research I propose is significant because of the unique current social and political climate in the United States. Police brutality against African Americans and the hugely disproportionate number of African American men and women incarcerated in the U.S. prison system undoubtedly has deep-seated historical roots in slavery and the passage of the 13th Amendment. While African American women are the most educated group in the United States (more than, for example, white men, black men, and white women), they earn, on average, just 64 cents to the white man's dollar. More generally, minorities, especially those with African roots, are marginalized, oppressed, and, compared with their white counterparts, face a disturbing lack of access to social, political, and economic opportunity and mobility.

Part of what I believe to be the reason for the perpetuation of inequalities and inequities, as well as biases, prejudices, and discrimination against people of color, is the way in which history has been warped, twisted, and slanted by the white majority. Similar to the way in which the (problematic) literary canon is mostly comprised of works written by privileged white men, so too is the way in which we remember and teach history. The experiences and voices of majority groups are magnified, while the experiences and voices of minority groups are silenced, subdued, or negated. Without these voices, our rendering of history is glaringly incomplete. More importantly, however, through excluding these voices, these experiences, these traumas, and these influences, we cannot fully understand the present. And ultimately, because of the way the past, present, and future are intimately connected, a lack of understanding of the past leads to a problematic and divisive present and future.

While the disconnect between historical events and the way in which these events are portrayed in public memory is largely acknowledged within academia (especially by scholars within the fields of

History, English, and Ethnic Studies), less research has focused on ways in which fictional works attempt to intervene on the re-telling and perpetuation of these histories. Of course, fictional works, just as non-fictional works, carry both benefits and limitations - and my research will seek to evaluate them both. My research will further add to the existing conversation by examining the role that fictional texts play in revising history and to what extent the selected novels and plays are, so to speak, “setting the record straight.”

I am well aware that this project is a large and complicated undertaking, and questions I will address have no clear or definitive answers. I realize this, and am excited by the prospect that, by the end of this project I likely will be left with more interesting questions than with simple answers. Learning *should* spur new questions. However, I believe that funding from the Canterbury program will allow me to peel back the layers of a conversation that is especially germane today, to both our nation and world.

V. Research Questions

Through understanding the history that is presented in mainstream discourses, the history that is closer to the truth, and the way that the texts that I have chosen mediate the differences between these histories, I have formulated four key questions that will guide my thinking as I write my thesis.

1. In what ways, and to what extent, are neo-slave narratives and *Hamilton* able to reclaim, revise, reconsider, or resituate people who have historically been silenced in mainstream history?
2. What are the affordances or opportunities that arise if these texts are able to alter our understanding of the past? And, conversely, what limitations are there with efforts to revise history?
3. To what extent can we understand inequalities and injustices in the 21st century as the result of historical silences?
4. How do progressive and current social movements give voice to those who have historically witnessed their voices silenced, negated, or ignored? How do these movements attempt to shift understandings of history?

VI. What do I hope to learn and takeaway from this project?

- Understand the “common knowledge” of United States history held by someone with a high school education.
- Articulate the ways that this common knowledge differs from historical truths and realities.
- Evaluate the extent to which my chosen texts intervene on dominant and mainstream discourses.
- Gain key skills in writing, researching, and refining a lengthy thesis.
- Work with and synthesize a variety of different types of texts (plays, novels, scholarly articles, textbooks).
- Develop my unique voice as a scholarly writer.
- Present my research, ideas, and interpretations to a scholarly audience.

The Canterbury program will offer me the opportunity to advance my scholarly writing and research skills, further sharpen my voice as a writer, and enable me to critically engage with complex and nuanced texts. All of these skills, as well as the ability to write a thoroughly researched and well-structured academic paper, will be crucial to my success in graduate school and beyond. In other words, this fellowship will provide me an important and valuable head start on exactly the kind of work I will likely be pursuing in my graduate and post-graduate studies.

More importantly however, I have been lucky to have taken many classes about which I have found myself immensely passionate -- classes that fly by, end too soon, and leave me on the edge of my seat, craving more. While I have valued the opportunity to do lengthy and quarter-long research projects

in some of these classes, the brevity of the quarter system often constrains me from delving as deeply as I would like into complicated ideas and engaging with a variety of sources. Not only will the Canterbury program provide me with a unique undergraduate opportunity to fully explore texts and existing scholarship that has been published before synthesizing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions of my own, but it will also allow me to make interdisciplinary connections and critically considered evaluations.

VII. Outcomes

My Canterbury project will result in a written thesis. In addition, I talked with Dr. Lueck about potentially submitting a version of my thesis for publication in *The Journal of Popular Culture*. However, one of the focuses of my project is looking at the way that texts -other than scholarly writing- intervene on these histories. To that extent, in addition to a written thesis, I hope to be able to show the results of my research in visual form.

Although the details and nuances of my project may not necessarily be accessible to everyone, the crux of my project looks at the importance of knowing and telling a truer history -- and the dangers of tainted or warped history. I would love to partner with student groups that represent historically marginalized communities to create a video that focuses on retelling aspects of their own histories that are misunderstood or from which they have been excluded or written out. This video will ideally be part of a panel discussion that includes both student and faculty panelists. This event will aim to encourage students, as consumers and producers of information, to critically evaluate and understand the ways in which mainstream discourses and public memory systematically silence the plight, the legacies, the accomplishments, the influences, and the voices of the oppressed.

Additionally, as this project is a huge and exciting endeavor, I plan to create a blog (or some other online social platform) to post updates on my research. This blog may consist of interesting connections I am making, new questions that emerge, or updates on how I am proceeding in my research and writing. This blog will both allow me a space to work through ideas in a more colloquial, conversational, and interactive manner as well as to create an archive of my thoughts and ideas after my thesis research and writing is complete.

VIII. Personal Experience

As an English and Ethnic Studies double major I have the research experience, preparation, and base knowledge that will be required in a research project of this magnitude. I am comfortable balancing multiple sources at once and engaging them in conversation with one another.

In Dr. Griffin's *Literature by Women of Color* class, I read some of the texts that I am including in this project. In fact, it was this class that spurred my interest in examining neo-slave narratives as a way of reclaiming histories for women of color. Since that class, I have taken *Introduction to African American Studies*, *Race and Ethnicity in the United States*, and *Malcolm and Martin* -- all classes that have given me the tools not only to understand the discrepancy between public memory and historical truths, but also to demonstrate the ways in which these warped understandings of the past continually haunt and oppress people in the present day. In addition, I took *American Theater from the Black Perspective*, a class in which I read plays written by African American playwrights, complicated my understanding of what a black play is/should be, and looked at the affordances and limitations of this type of theater.

Similarly, in Dr. Burnham's *Literary History and Interpretation* class, I did my "genre wiki project" on the literary genre of slave narratives. In that class, I created a Wikipedia page for the slave narrative genre. From researching slave narratives, looking at their affordances and limitations, and understanding the scholarly debate that surrounds these narratives, I have gained knowledge about the genre and why/how it led to the emergence of neo-slave narratives.

Conclusion

Our understanding of historical events and systems has serious and direct implications for our understanding of the present. If we misunderstand or misrepresent the past, we fall victim to misunderstanding people and their experiences in the present. When we misunderstand or fail to see people in the present, we reinforce and replicate their marginalization and oppression indefinitely.

Reclaiming, revising, and rewriting histories that have largely been owned by the privileged is no easy task. Especially when these histories are taught, reinforced, and perpetuated in school curricula, throughout the media, and in mainstream discourse in general. But neo-slave narratives and the Broadway musical *Hamilton* are 20th and now 21st century attempts to challenge these dominant narratives of history. By extension, these texts function to give power, agency, and autonomy to populations who historically have been denied a voice in shaping their own history. Of course, as recent, as fictional, and as texts that are largely limited to privileged and educated demographics, these texts are inherently limited in the extent to which they can revise our collective understandings of history. Yet their existence and the intervention that they attempt to make should not be glazed over or minimized as insignificant.

Ultimately, I firmly believe that because of the intricate link between the past, present, and future, a complete, complex, and nuanced understanding of the past is necessary for creating a more fair, just, and equitable present and future.

Proposed Work Timeline

Work timeline and texts utilized will likely be slightly altered depending on where research leads -- because of this, my timeline is most detailed in the beginning stages of my project, when I am setting up the framework for subsequent analysis and interpretation.

Spring 2017-

- Begin reading neo-slave narratives:
 - *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
 - *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams
 - *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones
- Read *Hamilton* by Ron Chernow
 - Begin reading supplementary texts
 - *Hamilton: The Revolution* by Lin-Manuel Miranda
 - *Who Tells Your Story: History, Pop Culture*
 - *Hidden Meanings in the Musical Phenomenon Hamilton* by Valerie Estelle Frankel

Summer 2017

- Read *The Colored Museum* and *Insurrection: Holding History*
- Attend a production of *Hamilton* and begin to consider the following questions:
 - How are the founding fathers portrayed in *Hamilton*? Is it a fair portrayal? Are these questions complicated by the intentionally diverse casting of the play?
 - While the cast is racially and ethnically diverse, there are no historic people of color in the play. In this way, does the play continue to write people of color out of the narrative of U.S. history? To what extent does the play resituate people of color?
 - How are music and dance uniquely used in *Hamilton*?
 - Generally, what are audiences' reactions to the play?
- Stay up-to-date on current events, particularly those that affect people with African roots
 - Where do we see the legacy of perpetuated silences erupting in public spaces?

Month Specific: June

- Complete initial readings of neo-slave narratives
- Look for patterns within and between the neo-slave narratives and begin to answer questions:

- In what ways, and in what moments, does each text attempt to alter our understanding of the role of enslaved women? Where are the moments of agency, choice, and activity?
- How do these texts actively counter popular stereotypes of black women (i.e. Mammy and Jezebel)?

Month Specific: July

- Focus on *Hamilton* by Ron Chernow, re-read important chapters
 - How does the biography represent Hamilton in a way that differs from common understandings of Hamilton? How do U.S. history textbooks present this history?
 - What is gained through looking at the Revolutionary Period through the eyes of an immigrant? Conversely, what are the limitations in generalizing Hamilton's social positioning?

Month Specific: August

- Primary focus on reading scholarly articles both for *Hamilton* and neo-slave narratives in order to better understand purpose, reception, affordances, and limitations of texts
- Beginning stages of outlining and structuring of paper

Fall 2017-

- Synthesize scholarly articles and primary texts
- Continue to draft, write, and revise in order to have an initial draft of thesis (or at least a substantial chunk) done by late November
- Reach out to scholars in the field, for example Wendy Warren who recently spoke at SCU (and is a SCU alum) about her book that focused on slavery in New England

Winter 2018-

- Final stages of writing, revising, and editing, done by late March or early April
- Attend a conference to present work

Budget

Books: \$250

While some of the books required for this text I already own, and I will try to borrow many books from the library, there are some books which will allow my research and readings will be more in depth if I am able to own them, and make notes in them. I have attached a preliminary list of books I plan to buy - prices sourced from Amazon.com. I left extra space in my budget as I will likely need more books depending on where my research takes me.

<i>Beloved</i> by Toni Morrison	\$8.70
<i>Corregidora</i> by Gayl Jones	\$13.80
<i>Dessa Rose</i> by Sherley Anne Williams	\$7.20
<i>Hamilton</i> by Ron Chernow	\$12.65
<i>Hamilton: The Revolution</i> by Lin-Manuel Miranda	\$25.00
<i>Who Tells Your Story: History, Pop Culture, and Hidden Meanings in the Musical Phenomenon Hamilton</i> by Valerie Estelle Frankel	\$15.00

<i>Black Subjects</i> by Arlene Keizer	\$8.00
<i>Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form</i> by Ashraf Rushdy	\$63.00
<i>African American Performance and Theater History</i> by Harry Elam	\$37.00
Total Cost	\$190.35

Printing and Miscellaneous Supplies: \$100

Note: The three budgetary items below are opportunities that I feel would greatly benefit my Canterbury project. However, I am aware of the budgetary constraints and acknowledge that everything cannot necessarily be funded. I have placed the three ideas below in order of what I feel is most crucial to the success of my project.

Hamilton in San Francisco - \$300-\$400

Since my proposal examines the role that *Hamilton* plays in revising, reclaiming, and reconsidering history, it will be important for me to see a production of the play itself. Unlike the other plays that I am considering, there is no published transcript of *Hamilton*. In fact, one of *Hamilton*'s producers publically said that seeing the play live is the only way to truly understand the message of the story. One of the main reasons that I chose *Hamilton* in particular is because of its current relevance, critical acclaim, and musical style that differentiates it from other Broadway productions. Prices are sourced from StubHub.com

Pop Culture Association and American Culture Association Conference: \$500

I plan to enter my work for presentation at the PCA/ACA national conference in Indianapolis, Indiana. The conference ranges from March 25th to April 1st, 2018. I can also submit my work for presentation at the Far West Pop Culture Association Regional Conference which is from February 24th through February 26th, 2018. This budget item covers airfare, accommodations, and minor travel expenses.

I may also submit my work for presentation at the Sigma Tau Delta convention from March 21st to March 24th in Cincinnati, Ohio. My goal is to have the opportunity to present and attend any one of the above three conferences. Attending and presenting these conferences would both give me the opportunity to present my work, listen to the work of others, and participate in workshops.

National Museum of African American History and Culture - Washington, D.C. - \$500

Ideally, I would have the opportunity to visit the NMAAHC. This museum has been wildly popular and is the result of decades of conversation, opposition, and struggle. My purpose for visiting this museum would be to better understand African American history as a whole and see the way that this huge and diverse history and culture is presented to the masses. Similarly, depending on the perspective taken in the museum and the scenes/objects displayed, the museum could function as an exhibit of either exposing or mitigating historical truths.

Total: \$1,700

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