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## GENERAL INTEREST ARTICLES

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### **An Ethical Revelation of the American Revolution: An Analysis of Communication Ethics and Hypertextuality in the Musical Hamilton**

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#### **Abstract**

*Since debuting in 2016, Hamilton has generated much scholarship on such topics as race relations and public memory. However, this article uses concepts of communication ethics and hypertextuality to situate the retelling of America's past for America's present. Connecting Hamilton to communication ethics proves paramount because it helps to situate the moral ground under which the characters stand, thereby serving as the epicenter for the show's ultimate message. Viewers are brought into a hypertextual world of two historical moments, America 'then' and America 'now,' and consider the juxtaposition of past and current ideas, tradition, culture and narrative commitments that all result in an ethical climax as the main character, Alexander Hamilton champion's an ethic of, "I am my brother's keeper."*

In August 2016, Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* opened at the Richard Rodgers Theater on Broadway. Miranda's musical tells the story of one of America's least-recognized founding fathers as a telling of America then by a cast of minority actors representing today's America. *Hamilton* tells the story of the first United States Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, a founding father who is often forgotten. The musical provides a retelling of his life and intertwines his relationships with academic and political colleagues, fellow soldiers, lovers, and family. The majority of *Hamilton*'s storyline is propagated by historical facts, but Miranda did take artistic liberties in order to make the musical more entertaining. For example, Hamilton

met his friends and adversaries at different times throughout his life than depicted in the show and was not as needlessly violent as sometimes depicted. For example, there is no historical record of Hamilton ever punching staff at King's College. Furthermore, such details as Burr asking Washington for a leadership position in the Army is also not grounded in historical proof, but such incidents help Miranda to develop the ideological tendencies of each character, as is typical in historical fiction.

While much scholarship has been generated on the popular musical since its debut, missing from scholarly analysis is how the musical uses concepts of communication ethics and hypertextuality to situate the retelling of America's past for America's present. Connecting *Hamilton* to communication ethics proves paramount because it helps to situate the moral ground under which the characters stand, thereby serving as the epicenter for the show's ultimate message. Audience members are taken on a rhetorical turn as they become aware of the characters' ideas, tradition, culture, and narrative commitments.

Viewers are simultaneously brought into a hypertextual world of two historical moments, America 'then' and America 'now,' and are challenged to consider the juxtaposition of past and current ideas, tradition, culture and narrative commitments that all result in an ethical climax as the main character, Alexander Hamilton champion's a Levinasian ethic of, "I am my brother's keeper." Examining *Hamilton* through this lens serves as the ideal exemplar of hypertextuality and communication ethics that is desperately needed in present day so we as a society can better understand why and how we are still embedded in an ongoing racial divide and why political tensions continue to rise up.

As Americans becomes increasingly divided, *Hamilton* reminds us that our legacy, our story, is ever present and we must remember the Other, or our fellow Americans across all

environments, as we navigate our future. Amidst social, political and economic strife in a postmodern era, the musical proves not only be a civics lesson, but also a valuable example of a communication ethic and hypertextuality that reminds audiences the importance of understanding the perspective of the other, working together to protect and promote a common good. Throughout the first act, violence, specifically through war, is depicted as a necessary means for achieving freedom. Ultimately, however, at the conclusion of the show, audience members are reminded that differing communicative ethics can be protected and promoted through a dialogue that recognizes the Other instead of resorting to violent acts that driven by individualism. Hypertextuality, or the interconnectedness of messages that influences interpretation, shifts “perception from a modern or hypermodern conception of the self to competing narrative grounds that fight for an opportunity to undergird the life of a communicative agent” (Arnett, 2018, p. 4). In other words, hypertextuality provides insight into the various ways a single common good can be interpreted. Since communication ethics often address multiple questions that exist in different eras but are co-present at a given temporal moment, this article will show how *Hamilton* presents a hypertextual story of the Founding Fathers that “raises a glass to freedom” (Miranda, 2020, 0:25) with characters rooted in a narrative ground that protects and promotes America’s past, present and future, through a common center of freedom, neutrality, and democracy.

However, to achieve a thorough analysis of Miranda’s work, one must first have a clear understanding of communication ethics and hypertextuality. Part of what makes *Hamilton* compelling is the way in which it tells a pivotal story in American history, but also highlights that the historical moment depicted is rooted in conflict, crisis, and to some extent, evil. I will enter this theoretical analysis from the lens of Hannah Arendt and Ronald C. Arnett whose

respective scholarly work discusses how individualism tied to communication ethics helps us to understand the danger when a community is unable to work together in order to protect and promote a common center. This theoretical analysis is then used to discuss how individuality, narrative ground, the banality of evil and ethical first principles are used in *Hamilton* to provide audiences with the ever-important notion that, in a neoliberal, postmodern world, we cannot forget the Other.

### **Communication Ethics and Hypertextuality**

According to Arnett (2018), the foremost assertion of a postmodern/hypertextual understanding of communication ethics is that there is no single “correct” communication ethics. “Communication ethics” can be understood as a term to describe what an individual group, society, or culture considers as good(s) worthy of protecting and promoting. Therefore, this definition implies that when an individual brings their communication ethics into a conversation, all participants must be tentative to these values in order for the conversation to be able to move toward potential dialogue. For it is at this place of dialogue where change can begin to occur.

Incorporating Arendtian theory into this analysis guides the understanding of communication ethics as portrayed in *Hamilton*. This understanding of the ethical framework is ultimately what leads audiences to remember their own call to the Other. Arendt (1958) aligns work with action as action is “the foremost mode of human relationship” (p. 41). Communication ethics understood from this perspective consists of practices, stories, narratives, and collective concurrence on the importance of a given good or multiple goods. Furthermore, power arises when individuals come together and unite through promises in order to act together (Arendt,

1960). Ultimately, power exists when individuals unite and act together in community, but vanishes once this community returns to individualism.

Arendt (1958) believed that a political institution cannot establish power through force, but rather it can gain power when people recognize the institution in the public realm. In addition to the public and private realms, there is a third category called the social where both the public and the private convene into a shared space (Arendt, 1958). In other words, the rise of the social is the process by which private needs, interests, and concerns assume public stature. A society existing in the social process is defined by a hierarchy in which an administration is a stabilizer and citizens who act together are laborers, consumers and taxpayers (Arendt, 1958). Society thrives amongst the masses, not individuals, thus generating a sense of conformity and uniformity.

### **The Communication Ethics of *Hamilton*: An American Musical**

To begin, it is important to recognize that the musical holistically functions as a hypertextual artifact in the sense that it tells the story of America's past through the lens of America today. This hypertextuality allows multiple perspectives of America's founding to coexist in one moment. Audiences experience a dramatic yet historically significant telling of the country's founding, but they are also invited to consider the notion of progress, or possibly lack thereof, by experiencing this historicity told through the America of today. This notion is personified through a cast comprised largely of minority actors and a score of Hip Hop music that pays tribute to a vibrant American culture that has notoriously fallen victim to prejudice even before the Battle of Yorktown occurred in 1781.

While critics have rejoiced over *Hamilton*'s hypertextual read of the founding of America and lauded the musical with a near record-breaking eleven Tony awards and Miranda with a

Pulitzer Prize for Drama (Schrader, 2019), several scholars have discussed the implications behind using a minority ensemble to portray a group of Caucasian people. Galella (2018) noted that viewing actors of a different skin color than that of the character they portray “gives the audience permission to think about achievements, not the fact that they’re slave owners” (p. 365). Herrera (2018) noted that this racially conscious casting tells a story bound by race, but acknowledges that Miranda explains in various interviews that he was unable to represent all aspects of history with a due diligence in a two hour and thirty-minute production. As a result, Miranda had to omit certain well-known aspects of the Founding Fathers’ stories such as the fact that they were all slave owners and also dramatize other elements to increase entertainment value. In other words, despite telling the story of America’s founding, Miranda (2020) finds ways to interject themes that were pertinent in the late 1700s, but does so in a way that is relevant to today’s postmodern society and spoke to the social disparities of 2015.

This hypertextual read of the musical contains several implications for the communicative ethic that drives the plot and individual character development. Communication ethics and culture are linked through material conditions and practices that shapes a person’s perception of the world, which encompass social, economic and symbolic capital and prompt a person to value certain elements over another. This perception-creating link helps to situate a person within a culture and also helps to shape the culture itself. While Arnett (2018) cautioned that this habitus can often be taken for granted, Miranda (2020) extrapolates this notion and makes it a focal point of primary character development. Hamilton is a “bastard, orphan. Dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean (0:20)”...who, even in his ascent to greatness is “penniless and flying by the seat of his pants” (2:32). Conversely, while Burr is an orphan, he was born into wealth and privilege and never had to overcome adversity to gain

access to the best education and social status. As America in present day stands in a clash of racial and social privilege, Burr's embedded narrative ground prompts him to function from a vantage point of privilege that calls forth the audience to understand the nation's history as well as this historical moment a little better in which the issue of race and social class is calling forth our attention to examine unreflective privilege. This unreflective privilege results in Burr's character being grounded in individualism and prevents him from establishing a community with a common center, which Arnett (2018) cautioned is the threat of individualism. Although Burr's character forms political allies to help him advance his power and agenda, his communicative ethic grounded in individualism posits him to "talk less and smile more" (Miranda, 2020, 1:04) Burr never used his beliefs to lead his community toward a common center; an action that would ultimately prevent him from advancing politically.

Each characters' recognition of their own material conditions and practices help to shape their view of themselves, their peers and their purpose in the revolution. These perceptions thereby create a link between the character, their culture, and their communicative ethics. Alexander Hamilton, often verbose, will speak his mind to whomever is nearby. He is passionate about his abilities, his goals for himself and his vision for America. Born impoverished and orphaned by the age of twelve, he feels he has nothing to lose and everything to gain. Burr, on the other hand, has prestige and cultural capital. Burr believes that his prestige is enough to succeed. Upon meeting Hamilton, Burr urges him to "talk less, smile more, don't let them know what you're against or what you're for..." (Miranda, 2020, 1:02). While Hamilton has his feet firmly planted in narrative ground and understands the Other, Burr's desire to be liked supersedes his ability to ground himself in morals or beliefs, causing him to simply speak to a phenomenological version of himself. While Hamilton fulfills his own destiny and works and

writes for the Other, or from a Levinasian stance, Hamilton works from a “derivative I” in which he is able to recognize the other instead of being absorbed in individuality (Arnett, 2017). By establishing communication ethics through narrative ground at the onset of act one, Miranda presents his characters through differing ideological frameworks that provides a cautionary tale on the importance of dialogue vs. monologue and the dire consequences of ignoring the Other.

It is important to note that Hamilton’s story is told through various narrators, allowing for different perspectives of multiple goods to emerge throughout the show, allowing the notion of multiplicity to be celebrated in this postmodern era. In the opening number, each cast member tells a part of Hamilton’s origins and notes their role in his life. Angelica and Eliza: “me, I loved him,” George Washington: “me I trusted him,” and Aaron Burr: “...me, I’m the damn fool that shot him” (Miranda, 2020, 3:34). Offering these different perspectives implies that there are various characters who see Hamilton as a friend, a spouse, a brother-in-law, a protégé, a father, and a political adversary, noting his positive characteristics, but also his flaws (Schrader, 2019). The audience is able to recognize how a single communicative ethic, that aimed to promote and protect a common good, helped to create a culture. This culture that Miranda builds around Alexander Hamilton exposes the petite narratives of each character to tell their motivations, values, or lack thereof, and how Burr’s and Hamilton’s inability to unite as a whole for the betterment of a single good, the progress of America, ends in the loss of his life, forcing others to tell his story.

In “My Shot,” Marquis de Lafayette “dream(s) of life without a monarchy”, but questions whether “the unrest in France will lead to anarchy” (Miranda, 2020, 1:40). Hercules Mulligan explains that he is a “tailor’s apprentice” and wants to “join the rebellion cause cause it is his chance to socially advance instead of sewin’ pants” (Miranda, 2020, 1:55). Miranda (2020)



positions Hamilton as a leader who listens to his friends and creates a call to heed a common goal. The character of Hamilton recognizes his own abilities in a hypertextual culture that allows room for others to rise up together, as a community, thereby functioning from a Levinasian derivative “I” (Arnett, 2017). Hamilton and his friends are situated within the same communication ethic as they aim to protect and promote a common good: the American revolution. Although they cannot predict or control the outcome of action, they encourage audience members to become invested in their communicative ethic and proverbially stand with them on their narrative ground as they will never throw away their shot to promote and protect the betterment of the nation and its citizens. However, each character is engaged in their own fight for power throughout the unfolding of the American revolution. As aforementioned in “My Shot,” the members of the revolution dream of a not only a better future for the nation, but also for themselves. This notion makes their communicative ethic particularly powerful as it demonstrates how to improve an individual life without being embedded in individualism. Hamilton and his allies fight for power, but also never usurp the other, thereby preventing them from being engulfed in the banality of evil.

### **Narrative Ground as Portrayed Through the Characters of Hamilton**

When examining this theoretical framework in our current temporal moment, Arnett (2018) clarified that the “juncture of postmodernity does not center on the self or totally ignore the self” (p. 8), but rather when situated in postmodernity and hypertextuality, identity emerges as a subset through narratives that “situate, embed, and ground the self within sources that shape identity. A postmodern, hypertextual lens illustrates an embedded and situated self and rejects a reified version of the self...but also acknowledges the existence of competing goods and practices” (p. 8). Arnett (2018) also explained the importance of narrative ground and its

relationship to the understanding of the self. “Narrative ground of particularity constitutes and situates the soil, nurturing goods and practices that frame a storied understanding of self” (Arnett, 2018, p. 7). Narrative ground is composed of ethics, culture, and rhetoric which work together as a trinity to form human identity. Identity and understanding of oneself come from the narrative ground on which we stand. Any practice that a person does or does not follow also helps to shape their identity. Arnett (2018) continued to explain narrative ground through its relationship with monologue. Monologue is the narrative ground under which people establish their identity. “People do not live for, die for, or kill for dialogue; they live, die, and kill for monologic ground that sustains identity” (Arnett, 2018, p. 13). While narrative ground is certainly not the only understanding of identity, for the purpose of this exploration of communication ethics, narrative ground specifically speaks to the goods that an individual attempts to protect and promote as their values and ideological framework is embedded in their narrative ground.

From the onset of the musical, Miranda situates Hamilton and Burr on two different narrative grounds. This theme transcends throughout the show as Burr continuously ignores the monologic narrative ground that matters to Hamilton. Burr dismisses Hamilton’s efforts to engage the Other, either his colleagues or his country, and instead approaches dialogue from a “disposition of narcissistic expectation that the world conform to our singular demands” (Arnett, 2018, p. 13). Hamilton, however, approaches dialogue in a way that acknowledges how narrative ground is connected to identity, thereby serving as the precipice of dialogue. In “Yorktown” as Hamilton recognizes that it takes a collective effort to emerge victorious, he motivates his troops to defeat the British by encouraging them to work smart and work together. He speaks in a way that acknowledges others’ accomplishments, not that of his own and notes that “public service

calls him” (Miranda, 2020). As he rallies his troops he says, “Laurens is in South Carolina redefining bravery, we will never be free until we end slavery” (Miranda, 2020, 1:35). The first part of that line shows Hamilton’s narrative ground at work as he speaks of his lauded comrade “redefining bravery,” but then comments on slavery (Miranda, 2020). While the script highlights Hamilton’s understanding of the importance of the other, the comment on slavery stands as a hypertextual juxtaposition to bring the show into the postmodern present day. The battle of Yorktown in 1781 was decades before the Civil War in which an established America fought for the abolition of slavery. The notion of equating freedom to the end of slavery in 1781 when many of the soldiers were slave owners, may not have been a driving metaphor of the battle. However, Miranda’s (2020) writing interweaves the goals of the battleground with the disparities of the battleground of present-day America to create a social commentary embedded in the narrative ground of the other from historic and current perspectives simultaneously.

As immigrants fighting for America’s freedom, Hamilton and Lafayette represent the vision, ideology and values that sought to be promoted and protected in the founding of a nation composed of immigrants. While Alexander Hamilton himself was proud of his immigrant status and embedded his feet in an ethic of hard work and dedication, never forgetting his origins, immigrants today, who often physically resemble the actors on stage, are often persecuted and denounced of the unalienable rights that the Founding Fathers, of immigrant descent, fought so hard to achieve. Again, this hypertextuality represents Hamilton’s fight for the other as his brother’s keeper, while also reminding a present-day audience that immigrants are just as equally “American” as natural born citizens.

In examining the show holistically, two major themes of the way in which hypertextuality engages in a kind of social pragmatism in which given stories are privileged over others are

“who lives, who dies, who tells your story,” and “history has its eyes on you” (Miranda, 2020). These themes again thrive in hypertextuality as the Founding Fathers tell the “story of tonight” while modern Americans spend their night in the theater. George Washington and Alexander Hamilton both personify these metaphors in the numbers “One Last Time,” and “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story.” In other words, by situating the metaphor of “who lives, who dies, who tells your story” (Miranda, 2020) in Arnett’s (2018) definition of communication ethics, the audience is able to understand Hamilton’s story through petite narratives told by his friends, foes, and family, who, despite their stories or perspective, all seek to promote Hamilton’s legacy and situate his story in the historical moment.

Miranda (2020) is also telling a story in the present day and uses “history has its eyes on you” as a modern-day call to reestablish common ground and operate from a communication ethic that understands the importance of the other and listens to each other. In a powerful scene in Act II, Hamilton and Washington sit down together, “one last time” to discuss Washington’s resignation from the Presidency. Washington sings:

I wanna talk about neutrality. I want to warn against partisan fighting. I wanna talk about what I have learned. The hard-won wisdom I have earned...If I say goodbye, the nation learns to move on. It outlives me when I'm gone...Though, in reviewing the incidents of my administration. I am unconscious of intentional error. I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects. Not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. I shall also carry with me...In the midst of my fellow citizens, the benign influence of good laws. Under a free government, the ever-favorite object of my heart and the happy reward, as I trust of our mutual cares, labors, and dangers. (Miranda, 2020, 1:11)

In this moment, Washington warns Hamilton and the audience against partisan fighting and urges listeners to learn from their mistakes. Washington uses a rhetoric that supports creativity and acknowledges cultural and ethical diversity and then calls forth a “tenacious, patient learning that embraces direction more akin to stumbling uncertainty than to unquestioning assurance” (Arnett, 2018, p. 18). Washington’s departure lands as a milestone for America in its early years as it said goodbye to its first leader, but also as a stark reminder for society today that “history has its eyes on us,” meaning that our actions today will be remembered and retold for years to come. By situating hypertextuality as the recognition of multiplicity, audience members are left to consider how these themes allow *Hamilton* to shift the perception of the privileged nature of these stories into a dialogue about America today, *with* America today. What Miranda (2020) achieves in *Hamilton* is the creation of a modern, relevant retelling of America’s history, but grounds his theme of “history has its eyes on you” in a narrative rooted in the key values of modernity while presenting it as a cautionary tale for an audience sitting in postmodernity where multiplicity is sought to be celebrated.

### **Ethical First Principles: How *Hamilton* Teaches Audiences to Reconcile Communicative Differences**

According to Arnett (2018), hypertextuality asserts that when a person views communication ethics as the protection of a social good, they also understand that others will present competing social goods with their own rational narratives. Acknowledging hypertextuality permits a space where individuals can come together and discuss and promote a diversity of goods that represent differing communication ethics (Arnett, 2018). A postmodern, hypertextual analysis of *Hamilton* from the vantage point of communication ethics follows the rule that there is no one correct conception of communication ethics, but rather acts as a

conceptual starting ground to highlight what goods a person, community, or society wish to protect or promote. Recalling Arnett's (2018) definition of communication ethics as the protection and promotion of goods that matter in everyday engagement, allows audience members to analyze how the characters of *Hamilton* use dialogue to either protect and promote or ignore the narrative ground of the Other. In other words, recognizing a person's communicative ethics helps to illuminate what motivates their actions. Once all participants understand what good(s) their peers wish to protect or promote, this conversation can now potentially advance toward dialogue.

When examining communication ethics, understanding the protected goods merely initiates a conversation and fails to yield immediate or obvious answers or resolve. Arnett (2018) cautioned that claiming that something is "unethical," simply reduces a good that another seeks to protect and promote as insignificant. Instead of tritely dismissing something or someone's behavior as "unethical," a person should instead attempt to discern the goods another seeks to protect or promote and then "consider their implications," not to necessarily achieve an optimum agreement, but to reach a point of better understanding. This point of understanding as ethical first principles, could still advance a conversation rooted in communication ethics toward a dialogue, which arouses a better possibility of reaching an agreement rather than creating a stagnant impasse of "unethical" accusations. Arnett (2018) explained that differing parties using "lofty language of correct action" breeds contention, thus creating a problem centered on communication ethics.

However, a stark contrast of two characters using the ethics first principle while standing upon differing narrative ground is evident in the relationship between Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Even though Hamilton and Jefferson agreed on the importance of implementing the

Constitution, they were not homogenous on how to implement and protect the particular good, which in this example is taxation and the role of the Federal Reserve. As a result, Hamilton and Jefferson have a debate, which in the musical is termed a “Cabinet Battle.” The title is a nod to iconic Hip Hop battles from MC’s at the onset of Hip Hop culture in the 1980s. Jefferson speaks first and exclaims:

But Hamilton forgets, his plan would have the government assume state's debts. Now, place your bets as to who that benefits. The very seat of government where Hamilton sits. Oh, if the shoe fits, wear it. If New York's in debt, why should Virginia bear it? Uh, our debts are paid, I'm afraid. Don't tax the South 'cause we got it made in the shade...Stand with me in the land of the free and pray to God we never see Hamilton's candidacy. Look, when Britain taxed our tea, we got frisky. Imagine what gon' happen when you try to tax our whisky.  
(Miranda, 2020, 1:15)

Hamilton responds with:

If we assume the debts, the union gets new line of credit, a financial diuretic. How do you not get it, if we're aggressive and competitive, the union gets a boost, you'd rather give it a sedative? A civics lesson from a slaver, hey neighbor, your debts are paid 'cause you don't pay for labor...And another thing, Mr. Age of Enlightenment, don't lecture me about the war, you didn't fight in it. You think I'm frightened of you, man? We almost died in a trench while you were off getting high with the French...Hey, turn around, bend over, I'll show you where my shoe fits. (Miranda, 2020, 2:25)

In this example, Jefferson and Hamilton choose vitriol over veracity. Miranda’s characters understand that they need to protect a common good, the Constitution, and the advancement of America. However, because they disagree with the best practice to protect the good in question,

they simply reduce the other's behavior and beliefs to something "unethical" and focus on the faults of the other instead of the betterment of the country. Had the characters understood "ethical first principles," they would have been better fit to put their differences aside, listen to one another, generate a dialogue, and while not necessarily agree with the other's ideas, understand their perspective and respect the importance of the petite narrative each sought to protect in the ultimate good that is America. While Hamilton's character does remain true to his communicative ethic and act as his brother's keeper throughout the musical, Miranda exposes Hamilton's hubris in his relations with his colleagues. Whether Hamilton's character is suggesting to his family that "John Adams doesn't have a real job," (Miranda, 2020, 3:33) or offering to see if his shoe fits in Jefferson's posterior, Hamilton's verbose tendencies did occasionally impede his ability to listen to the Other, thereby resulting in a political impasse instead of needed resolve. This expose serves as a cautionary tale to the audience as Miranda shows how even a character with the purest of intentions to move a community toward a common center can still possess a level of hubris that can ultimately prove tragic. Hamilton's character personifies what de Tocqueville (2012) refers to as selfishness, the opposite of individualism, because his behavior is social and involves consideration of others, even when using others to his advantage such as during his military pursuits. However, while Hamilton's character is verbose, he is never without the intent to help the Other, whereas his political adversary, Aaron Burr, is unable to move away from his embedded ground of individualism.

### **Aaron Burr and the Banality of Evil**

In the space of society which Arendt (1977) termed the Social, we become increasingly unable to think for ourselves, act for ourselves, and accept responsibility for the consequences of what we say or do. In other words, we trade our true humanity for a banal simulacrum of what it means to be human, and in that process, we can do great harm to ourselves, each other, and the



world. This is how Arendt (1977) defined the “banality of evil.” The banality of evil lies “within the space of habitus, thoughtless practices and unexamined assumptions drive decision-making” (Arendt, 1999 p. 113). “The banality of evil,” Arendt (1977) defined as “evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced back to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness” (Lederman, 2019, p. 199). Thoughtlessness leads one to function according to the rules of the state, regardless of what they may be. Arendt (1977) connected thoughtlessness with the banality of evil by explaining that individuals commit egregious crimes, but do so unthinkingly and forgetfully, thereby becoming hyper focused on themselves and ignoring what they have done, or how they have hurt the other. This act of ignoring the harm imposed on the Other suggests that the individual is grounded in individualism, which according to de Tocqueville (2012), is the sin of the West. It is a provincial idea that has become the banality of evil. Concern about individualism is not new. However, we must recognize that unreflective praise of the individual from their peers invites a communicative “banality of evil” that provides a guise for tyranny without altering its potential for destruction. Arendt (1977) presented a phenomenological challenge to individualism by highlighting that individualism is a human deformity, an existential lie (Arnett, Fritz, Holba, 2007). In other words, by understanding individualism separately from individuality, individualism can be framed as a point on the horizon of the banality of evil.

Therefore, an individual must understand culture from a postmodern/hypertextual to recognize that there is room in a community or society for multiple practices to coexist. While the individual does not have to agree with varying perspectives or practices, hypertextuality can create a culture in which there are multiple stories simultaneously vying for attention. prevents

turning inward, thereby again representing “the banality of evil.” In heeding a call against thoughtlessness, Arendt (1999) noted that morally and even politically speaking, indifference, though common, is a great danger to society. Privilege and the sovereign self are a banality of evil as it has the power to decimate communities. Out of, privilege, the sovereign self, or the unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment, lies the banality of evil.

Communication ethics and culture both contain goods and practices that are important to a group or person. However, because culture contains different ethics, contention between varying ethics and opinions is inevitable. When a person acknowledges the goods and practices of identified importance or what matters to themselves and others, the individual begins to have rhetorical influence on their audience.

According to Arendt (1958), political action should be settled through argument and discussion. By the end of the musical, it becomes clear that Hamilton and Burr stand at a communicative impasse. Burr’s contention for Hamilton peaks when Hamilton votes against him during the Presidential election. It is in this moment that Hamilton shows his truest communicative ethic, standing strong in his narrative ground as he states, “while I do not agree with his beliefs, at the end of the day Jefferson has morals, Burr has none” (Miranda, 2020). Even though Burr was Hamilton’s first “friend” when he arrived in New York City, Hamilton remained loyal to his own beliefs and ethics, and voted for the candidate who also had an understanding for the other, even if they vehemently disagreed in previous Cabinet Battles. As a result, instead of Burr’s character realizing that dialogue could alleviate their differences, he doubled down and challenged Hamilton to a duel, which ultimately proved fatal.

In “The World Was Wide Enough,” Burr reflects on his past while Hamilton looks to the future, as he always does, “imagining death to the point that it feels like a recollection, rather

than a fear of what's to come" (Silva, Sheeren, 2017 p. 193). Burr's own self-centered story and lack of narrative ground under which he stood placed him outside of Hamilton's story, and in a sense outside of history. While Hamilton who is "past patiently waiting," spends his entire life living as if he is running out of time, Burr patiently waits for an opportunity to arise that allows him to advance his political status (Miranda, 2020). However, Burr's hesitance, potentially propelled from his born privilege, allows Hamilton to surpass him in professional gain to the point that Hamilton casts the deciding vote to prevent Burr from winning the Presidential election. As the duel arises, he actively blames Hamilton for his own shortcomings and being rejected from "the room where it happens." Burr, who spent his whole life "wait(ing) for it" says "before their duel, "it's either him or me. The world will never be the same...this man will not make an orphan of my daughter" (Miranda, 2020). Given the fact that Miranda has situated Burr's character on a ground of individualism throughout the show, audiences are likely not surprised when Burr views this duel from a "him or me" vantage. This is a pivotal moment for audience members as they recognize that communication has failed to advance to dialogue, thereby denouncing the opportunity for progressive change. Therefore, Burr's sense of a narcissistic self is likely going to provoke a violent outcome serving to remind viewers of the dangers of ignoring the Other as a communicative agent.

Even though we are situated in postmodernity, terms such as the "reified self, the sovereign self, the authentic self, and the narcissistic self" are all defined in hypermodernity (Arnett, 2018, p. 7). In hypermodernity, the self does not stand on a particular narrative ground, but instead works from the "position of a minimal self, self-adorned with its maximal fascination of influence" (p. 7). As it relates to the self's identity, Miranda (2020) situates the Burr's character in a hypermodern context. He is narcissistic in the sense that he only cares about his

own advancements and does not see the value in working with the other unless it is to achieve his own political gain. Burr does not stand on a narrative ground as Hamilton does. He is displaced as an orphan but relies on his individualism to succeed.

Burr's jealousy and personal frustrations prevent him from talking to Hamilton to realize that they can understand each other and coexist and instead serves as the trigger that prompts Burr to pull the trigger. According to Silva and Sheeren (2017), Burr's character becomes a victim of his own recurring tragedy. He blames others for his loss and is unable to comprehend how his approach to communication ethics of talking less, smiling more and not allowing others to know "what you're against or what you're for" (Miranda, 2020, 1:04) has resulted in the system to work against him. As a result, Burr is condemned to a position on the outskirts of the historical moment.

Hamilton, on the other hand, lives with the perspective that death is imminent which propels him forward each day. Every day he is alive is a gift, a victory won, where he can work toward building a better, sovereign nation, and building his story or his legacy. Hamilton sees himself within a world where he has a clear call to heed. He moves the nation along for the betterment of others. He is his brother's keeper. As the duel commences and Burr fires towards Hamilton, time stops, the room is silent except for Hamilton's voice. He declares once more that he believes in the betterment of the other and up to the moment of his death, his feet remained steadfastly grounded in a narrative that sought to help others and recognized the benefits of multiple perspectives.

Burr, my first friend, my enemy. Maybe the last face I ever see. If I throw away my shot, is this how you'll remember me? What if this bullet is my legacy? Legacy, what is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see. I wrote some notes at the beginning of

a song someone will sing for me. America, you great unfinished symphony, you sent for me. You let me make a difference, a place where even orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up. I'm running out of time, I'm running, and my time's up. Wise up, eyes up. (Miranda, 2020, 1:43)

He knows that history has its eyes on him in the sense that his actions will likely be remembered after his death, and while he cannot control the outcome of action, he does not want Burr's bullet to be his legacy. In his final moments, Hamilton permits Eliza and subsequent generations to rise up and tell his story. Hamilton questions to both himself and the audience, "if this bullet is (his) legacy." Hamilton points his gun to the sky and Burr's bullet strikes Hamilton in the chest. Hamilton threw away his shot, remaining true to his narrative ground and always maintaining an ethics first principle until his last moment.

Arendt (2004) explained that, at times, action results in violence instead of rhetoric. When this occurs, violence does not have a home in the political or public realms because it often occurs unnecessarily and without reason. For Arendt (1958), political action should be settled through argument and discussion instead of violence. While violence has been used to resolve political conflict, according to Arendt (1958) dialogue in political action is the preferred alternative to violence as it provides a solution-focused foundation for a more idealistic society. In other words, action, nor progressive change, can exist to its potential without a public space, and it is within that public space that conversation can move to meaningful dialogue.

However, Arendt (1963) conceded that in some circumstances, within both the private and public realms, there are situations in which violence may be the only reasonable course of action. There are some instances in which violence, instead of argument, speech or consideration of consequence is the only way that an individual perceives the opportunity to

achieve justice. Burr's character embodied this sentiment, as he believes that Hamilton and he have reached a communicative and ideological impasse, thereby killing his foe. Within an Arendtian understanding of the public realm, Burr believed that the world could not accommodate both Hamilton and him, thereby prompting him to shoot Hamilton instead of engaging in dialogue to resolve their differences. He ignored the other, thereby putting his own identity and place in history at risk. His motivation for doing so lies within his inability to acknowledge a hypertextual culture, thus personifying Arendt's banality of evil.

Burr's anger toward Hamilton and envy of his success and power prevented him from relating to Hamilton on an ideological level. This jealousy and disdain caused provided the antecedent to his decision making, ultimately resulting in Hamilton's death. Situated on a narrative ground of privilege and individualism, Burr committed an egregious crime, but did so unthinkingly and forgetfully, thereby becoming hyper focused on the individual. Individualism as the sin of the West is a provincial idea that has become the banality of evil, with Burr's character personifying this sin. This representation of the banality of evil in Burr's character is followed by feelings of guilt as he realizes too late, that "the world was big enough for Hamilton and for me" (Miranda, 2020, 4:20). Only then does the audience get a sense that Burr's character has found a way to identify with the other and understand a hypertextual culture and perspective.

### **Conclusion**

As Miranda concludes the musical, the cast reunites to sing together just as they did in the opening number. In this moment, even those who opposed Hamilton because his beliefs did not align with their own, recognized his brilliance and contribution to the protection and promotion of America. The uncertainty in human action or the notion of the unexpected, lends

itself to the idea of fate or destiny. Human action “almost never fulfills its original intention; no act can ever be recognized by its author as his own with the same happy certainty with which a piece of work of any kind can be recognized by its maker” (Weisman, 2020 p. 148) After Hamilton’s death, his widow, Eliza, laments about how she attempted to make sense of Alexander’s innumerable notes as he always wrote as he was “running out of time” (Miranda, 2020). Recognizing that she could never fully return to pure authorial intent, Eliza personifies the theme of “who lives, who dies, who tells your story,” and is able to continue to tell Alexander’s story, posthumously. Eliza recognizes that stories matter.

As a musical debuting in 2016 that continues to thrive in 2021 as it reached an entirely new audience with the 2020 release on Disney Plus, *Hamilton* holistically challenges America for a third act where social justice and true inclusion are center stage. What happens when individuals in society do not see the other? Unlike the characters of Aaron Burr or Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton understands that it is necessary to recognize the Other and stands upon a narrative embedded in a community and not individualism. As America ventures on in a neoliberal, postmodern world, individualism continues to usurp and ignore community, tradition, and culture. As a result, generations of Americans are dying and with them, so are their stories, their culture, and their traditions. This death of stories leaves individuals without a community to proverbially “push off” of and become embedded in a common center or identity. *Hamilton* serves as a warning that Americans are losing communities and being left with the individual. Aaron Burr’s character represents the banality of evil that will begin to represent Americans if we continue to protect and promote the notion of individualism instead of community. *Hamilton* uses a historical framework to speak to the ideological peril of America’s present day. Communication ethics matter. The narrative ground embedded under the feet of the

Other matters. Beyond race, ethnicity, or gender, as Americans, we must attend to the Other. Miranda's characters remind audiences to attend to the particular because we have an obligation to a world that is not yet born to protect and promote communities instead of resorting to violence and vitriol.

In closing, Arnett (2018) reminds us that “when a communication ethic dwells in an environment of habitual practices and repetition, the power and significance of a given narrative produces a more comprehensive and pervasive milieu—a culture” (p. 8). Cultures contain multiple narratives and goods, not all of which agree or mesh with one another. Culture creates a space for understanding and identifying goods that should be protected or promoted. May America be a comprehensive culture that protects the value of our nation. Although we may not always agree with one another, just as Hamilton and Burr did not agree, may we be able to stand on our narrative ground while accepting others' differences and using unique platforms to advance our understanding of the other. May we understand in the present what Aaron Burr failed to realize until after Hamilton's death: that the “world was big enough for Hamilton and me” (Miranda, 2020).



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