

## Confronting Inequity / Fighting the Jeffersonian Dismissal

Matthew R. Kay

**A founding father's views on race challenge teachers to change course.**

A few months ago, the faint sound of piano chords drew me out of a staff meeting and into our school's hallway. Following it, I eventually found Anna, a colleague of mine, stooped over the keys, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. When she finally looked up, she waved me over and said, "Want to hear something cool? Serenity [one of our students] wrote a new *Hamilton* song from Peggy's perspective ... it's called 'And Peggy.' I'm just trying to help her get the music down." Anna immediately launched into a beautifully written piece that warmed my teacher's heart—just as when I've heard freshmen softly crooning to themselves, "*How do you write like tomorrow won't arrive / How do you write like you need it to survive ...*" as they grind out one of my bluebook essays.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* has sparked a generational wave of creativity and curiosity about the era of the Founding Fathers, and I am so here for it.

The views of one particular founding father, Thomas Jefferson, have sparked some of my own recent thinking about curriculum and equity. Jefferson emerges from Miranda's play with a few unexpected—though well-deserved—wounds to his legacy. He is *Hamilton*'s antagonist in both of the musical's rap battles. One of these battles has him famously slain by one of the show's most audience-pleasing lines: "*They keep ranting / We know who's really doing the planting.*" This passing reference to slavery is the only time that *Hamilton* directly highlights Jefferson's career as a slaver. (Miranda chose not to include his draft of a third battle depicting the Founding Fathers' debate over slavery, but he included it in the 2016 *Hamilton Mixtape* album. In that rap battle, the protagonist launches an even more personal salvo against Jefferson: "*How will the South find labor for its businesses? / How will Jefferson find his next mistresses?*") But even this light treatment exposes the often papered-over violence that characterized Thomas Jefferson's relationships with people of color.

Jefferson was in fact one of the preeminent race scholars of his day. The ideas in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1785, did much to pseudo-scientifically validate 18th-century racism. At one point in his book, for instance, he points to a strangely aesthetic reason to colonize all freed blacks outside of America—our "ugly" skin color. He writes: "Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarfskin, or in the scarfskin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature ...." And after mentioning the beautiful ways in which white skin blushes, he winces at the "eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race." He even goes so far as to claim that black men prefer "beautiful" white women as much as "the Oran ootan [orangutan]" prefers "the black woman over those of his own species." He goes on in this manner, as much a founding father to American racism as to the American system of government.

This rarely discussed legacy has particular relevance to teachers interested in confronting the inequities in their curriculum. Most obviously, we should teach Jefferson's generation of leaders—and leaders of all generations—in all their complexity, capable of both brilliance and foolishness, kindness and cruelty. There's enough time for complexity. But Jefferson's writing also points to another lesson, one that teachers like me should continually find humbling. It's about the legacy of perceptions and the ways people of color are routinely characterized in history.

A few lines after his skin-color diatribe, Jefferson moves on to black people's purportedly limited intellectual and artistic capacity:

But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites, with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry.

Thomas Jefferson's thesis is plain: black people are inferior because, with all we've gone through, we don't have the wherewithal, creativity, or intelligence necessary to craft anything beautiful.

As a writer, I find this thesis particularly jarring. It's safe to assume that 18th-century poets of color like Phyllis Wheatley would have found it infinitely more so.

## Questioning the Curriculum

Yet, as an educator, I have been pushed to an even more personal challenge by Jefferson's racism: How often, in my teaching, do I unintentionally send a Jeffersonian message that black stories are limited to struggle stories? How often does my curriculum make space for the celebration of black culture? How often do we unpack, analyze, and ultimately appreciate minority narratives without needlessly highlighting the influence of white people? Most important, how often am I asking black students the annoying question that W.E.B. Du Bois described so well in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903: "How does it feel to be a problem?"

This is not to suggest that stories of oppression and resistance shouldn't be discussed. Rather, the point is to question whether my curriculum, at its most basic level, shows students that people of color are also poets and philosophers; that we are funny; that we are both pious and irreverent; that we create, not just out of resilience, but because of our shared authentic humanity. The great beauty of *Hamilton* is that through its powerful writing and depictions, Lin-Manuel Miranda has convinced a generation of students that the American Revolution doesn't need to be a predictable snooze-fest. He accomplished this by presenting as many of Alexander Hamilton's real-life complexities as would fit in a play, by leaning into the roundness of his character.

As anti-racist educators, we must have similar goals. We must work to expose our students as much to people of color's *poetry* as we do to their *misery*, so that we might inspire a generation to finally recognize the fullness of each other's character.



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