



**Culture Shock!#@! – Why
immigration is a cultural
force that brands should
embrace**

BLINK 11 CULTURE

JON GITTINGS, CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER, AMERICAS 19 MAY 2017

Why immigration is a cultural force that brands should embrace

“Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now! History is happening in Manhattan and we just happen to be in the greatest city in the world.”

*The Schuyler Sisters, **Hamilton***

When a musical about American founding father Alexander Hamilton opened in 2015, it quickly became one of the most talked about events on the American cultural landscape. *Hamilton* is sold out until August 2017 and tickets go for \$1,000 or more. The

show broke a record by grossing \$3.3 million... in a single week. Simply put, *Hamilton* is a phenomenon.

But why?

The answer begins in the era in which *Hamilton* is set (1776 to 1804), a time when only 32,000 people lived in Manhattan. A map of the city in 1782 shows Manhattan Island's largely unoccupied, natural condition.

Then everything changed, and it never stopped. In the last 20+ years of his life, Hamilton witnessed a surge of German immigration. Then came the Irish in the mid-1800s. In 1865, America abolished slavery, emancipating 3.9 million African Americans. At the turn of the 20th century, America experienced successive waves of Polish, Italian and Russian immigration. Most recently, people are coming from Mexico, China, India and the Philippines.

Indeed, in the one hundred years following Hamilton's death in 1804, waves of immigrants drove America's population from around 6 million to more than 84 million people.

Regardless of origin, nearly all immigrants shared a similar, unwelcoming experience. They were willfully misunderstood, at best, with most simply trying to find a new path for themselves and their families.

Fortunately for us, they did. Hollywood, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, hip-hop and rap, for example, all emanated from immigrant communities and experience.



Hamilton's creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, chose hip-hop and rap as the basis of the show that is now the hottest ticket on Broadway. His inspiration came from the famous (and fatal) 1804 duel between Hamilton and Aaron Burr; Miranda, a second-generation Latino immigrant, saw a parallel with the rap rivalries of the 1990s.

"It's a hip-hop story," Miranda told *The New York Times*. "It's Tupac." The music and predominantly non-white cast of blacks and Latinos are ways of "pulling you into the story and allowing you to leave whatever cultural baggage you have about the founding fathers at the door."

This 'cultural baggage', however, is critical to how culture evolves and develops.

American culture has been – and continues to be – defined by its immigrant creators

While first-generation immigrants may struggle to adapt to a new society, it is often the second and third generations, like Miranda himself, who are inspired by new possibilities and higher-risk pursuits. Shunned by elite professions like law and finance, these immigrants may themselves reject conventional careers in favour of those that foster cultural innovation and reward determination, resilience and creativity.

The multicultural, quasi-outsider experience of second- and third-generation immigrants may be uncomfortable, but it also stimulates 'the new', as individuals create their own place in the sun.

"Persons who have been socialised in two or more cultures have broader imaginations about the range of human responses to love, death, family and other aspects of life," wrote Professor Charles Hirschman of the University of Washington. "Marginality, combined with extraordinary talent and strong artistic sensitivity, leads to greater openness to innovation."

American culture has been – and continues to be – defined by its immigrant creators.

Among the most influential are:



- The moguls of Hollywood (including the majority of directors with two or more Academy Awards), who are all immigrants or the children of immigrants;
- Literary figures like Eugene O’Neill (above, middle) and August Wilson, and giants of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, including Rothko, Lee Krasner and Warhol;
- Singers like Ella Fitzgerald (above, right), one of the most influential vocalists of the 20th century, who worked with Gershwin, Rodgers and Berlin to literally create “The Great American Songbook”;



- Artistic directors like George Balanchine (Giorgi Melitonovitch Balanchivadze) (above, left), the Russian godfather of American dance and founder of the New York City Ballet.
- Musicians like Benny Goodman (above, middle), who ignored racial

taboos and moved jazz from segregated nightclubs into the mainstream;

- Songwriters like Irving Berlin (otherwise known as Israel Isidore Baline) (above, right), the Russian-Jewish writer of the definitive holiday song, “White Christmas”;



- Entertainers like Al Jolson (Asa Yoelson) (above, left), the highest-paid entertainer of the 1920s and 1930s;
- Creators and innovators of perhaps the most-American art form of them all, the musical, including Ira Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, Richard Rodgers and Miranda (above, right);

These are all entrepreneurs who succeeded, created and over-performed because of the very nature of the immigrant experience and condition. They were and still are the outsiders, the marginalised, the strugglers and the risk-takers who, in many cases, create the most beautiful things in the world.

Too often, though, immigrants, or ‘multicultural audiences’, are an afterthought for brands

Too often, though, immigrants, or ‘multicultural audiences’, are an afterthought for brands: the subject of the “Have you remembered to include a slide on multicultural?” question. This can be a real miss.

By being so culturally influential, immigrants are often incredibly valuable allies, endorsers and consumers:

- As consumers, immigrants are more likely to be risk-takers who are open to new things and experimentation (a pretty good trait for NPD, testing and trial).
- As members of tight-knit communities, they have and can offer access to networks of influence and brand adoption.
- As creators, they develop the innovative content and entertainment franchises that are so deeply desirable to brands.

Which brings us back to Lin-Manuel Miranda, a man of Puerto Rican descent, from the Latino neighbourhood of Inwood, New York, and the author of *Hamilton*:

*How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman,
Dropped in the middle of a forgotten
Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor
Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?
The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father
Got a lot farther by working a lot harder
By being a lot smarter
By being a self-starter
...Plannin' for the future see him now as he stands on
The bow of a ship headed for a new land
In New York, you can be a new man.*

And so, rather than leaving 'the multicultural question' for last, there are some brands that might benefit from considering immigrants first.

After all, as another culture creator, Chuck Palahniuk, author of *Fight Club* and the grandson of a Ukrainian immigrant, puts it:

“The truth is... immigrants tend to be more American than people born here.”

BLINK 11 CULTURE