

HAMILTON:
THE POWER OF REPRESENTATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	3
	a. Representation	
	b. Hamilton’s Scope	
II.	THEORY.....	6
	a. The Concept of Framing	
III.	METHOD.....	7
	a. Multimodal Method	
IV.	ANALYSIS.....	8
	a. Characters and Casting Choices	
	b. Representation through Movement and Design	
	c. Hamilton: Politics, Society and Controversies	
V.	CONCLUSION.....	14
VI.	REFERENCES.....	15

I. INTRODUCTION

The musical *Hamilton* addresses the societal issue of representation through diverse casting choices and incorporating history through movements. *Hamilton* as a musical became an expression of political identity regarding race and nationalism through “America now” telling the story of “America then”. The musical takes on one of America’s founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, ’s journey of life and the formation of the United States of America. *Hamilton* received both applause and critiques throughout the running of the Broadway tours, mainly regarding historical accuracy and character representation (Deerwester 2016). Rather than casting white actors/actresses, which would be accurate to the actual historical figures, the cast members are diverse. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the director, producer, and writer of the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, explained his decision regarding the casting to represent the “America now” (Kohn 2020). Despite the founding fathers’ race being white, America consists of diverse ethnicities, and all the citizens identify as Americans (Spiro 2008). The diverse casting aims to provide a snapshot of America’s identity and that America’s history belongs to all Americans, regardless of race (Ellis-Petersen 2017). Miranda believes that *Hamilton* is a story about “America then” and told by “America now” (Barkaman and Wall 2017).

With audience and viewers worldwide, *Hamilton* is relevant in telling America’s story, Alexander Hamilton’s story, America’s identity, and the fight for representation. To learn more about representation in the musical *Hamilton*, we will look at the concept of framing and use examples from the multimodal analysis. The multimodal method often analyses sound, lyrics, and visuals. Due to limitations, this research will only use the multimodal analysis of visuals. However, I highly encourage future research to explore other aspects as well. The visuals provide an analysis of representation through casting choices, design, and movement. Due to the almost impossible way to watch the performance live, especially with the original cast members, I will be analysing the recorded version, film format of the musical *Hamilton* streamed through Disney+.

a. Representation

The term “representation” that we know refers to the sense of being “staged” (Daloz 2021). Daloz pointed out the problem for an established “representation theory” due to the discourse of the term “representation” (Daloz 2021). The term “representation” then branches into the term “representative” and “represented” (Daloz 2021). For example, Christopher Jackson is a “representative” of African-American actors, and African-Americans are “represented” by him. However, despite playing George Washington in the history musical, Jackson is not a “representative” of Washington and Washington is not “represented” by

Jackson. Thus, for the research, representation will refer to semiotics in *Hamilton* visible through diverse casting choices, design and movement regarding history and discourses. Although Daloz mainly analysed the theatrical concepts into the political realm, using theatre as a metaphor, the three terms remain applicable in the context of *Hamilton*. *Hamilton* attempts to produce an edutainment that could lead to further research, studies and projects (Miranda et al. 2020). The choice for a diverse casting offers “representation” of different ethnicities in America to say that ethnicities and immigration status do not determine the qualification to be an American (Ellis-Petersen 2017). The diverse casting also “represent” the message that America is not made up of just one ethnicity; therefore, the story of America’s founding father(s) belongs to all (Barkaman and Wall 2017). The concept of “representation” could explain Miranda’s idea of “America then” versus “America now”, and the casting, movements and design aspects were chosen for “representation”.

b. Hamilton’s Scope

Hamilton is a musical performed by a diverse casting telling Alexander Hamilton, one of America’s founding father’s story (Paulson 2020). Due to the amount of attention the musical receives, any statements, stories or political stances are witnessed by a large scope of audiences. Being a high-profile production provides the influence of navigating or framing a particular perception. The scope of the performances extends through Broadway, Off-Broadway, and most recently through Disney+ streaming service. As a Broadway musical, the performance permanently resides in mainly the Richard Rodgers Theatre (Richard Rodgers Theatre n.d.). *Hamilton* also exists in different locations around the globe, including London, Los Angeles, Australia and Germany (Hamilton Official Site n.d.). For North America, the musical offers occasional tours around the continent (Hamilton Official Site n.d.). Each performances seat roughly around 300 attendees Off-Broadway and 1,300 attendees on Broadway (Richard Rodgers Theatre n.d.). Introducing *Hamilton* in the film version aims to continue telling Hamilton’s story and America’s history despite theatre closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Miranda et al. 2020). The film also helped boost the Disney+ streaming service and extend the number of audiences globally (Durkee 2020). *Hamilton* opens the opportunity for more people to watch, learn, research and preserve Hamilton’s story and America’s history.

The most prominent controversy from *Hamilton*, as a Broadway show, as a “mixtape”, and as a film, is regarding historical accuracy. Based on Ron Chernow’s biography of Alexander Hamilton, Miranda attempts to create an edutainment, or what Jackson calls a “novel hybrid entertainment” (Jackson 2017). Historian Gordon-Reed explained the expectation for

the musical to not hit every part of history accurately due to the entertainment element of the production (Miranda et al. 2020). The entertainment elements could include the alteration of narrative, dramatisation, characterisation and movement (Harbert 2018). Miranda hoped that *Hamilton* provides a baseline for future research and inspires a more profound learning experience rather than functioning as an education source (Harbert 2018).

II. THEORY

a. The Concept of Framing

The concept of framing offers the reason for representation's significance. The term "framing" often refers to perspective, perception and focus (Chong and Druckman 2007). Entman discusses how the discourse of the term "frame" provides various systems for framing theory (Entman 1993). Entman explores the concept of "framing" as a process of selection and salience (Entman 1993). Entman explained that "to frame" means to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993). According to Entman, frames "define problems", "diagnose causes", "make moral judgements", and "suggest remedies" (Entman 1993). The concept of framing is a great theory to understand *Hamilton's* education and entertainment hybrid as a history musical.

Entman introduced the differences between the concept of "frame", "framing", and "framework" (Entman 1993). Entman mentioned that frames have "at least four locations in the communication process": the communicators, the text, the receiver, and the culture (Entman 1993). In *Hamilton*, the cast acts as the communicators, the narrative and production as the text, the large audience scope as the receiver, and American representation as the culture. Through *Hamilton*, the show invites diversity and initiates the conversation of America's past and present (Miranda et al. 2020), which suits the "framing" concept. *Hamilton* "frames" Alexander Hamilton as an ambitious immigrant with a checkered past and flaws. The musical's "framing" of Hamilton differentiates from America's history that "frames" Hamilton as a "great beast" (Knott 2018). The two "frames" also differ from Hamilton's third "frame", mainly based on Thomas Jefferson's opinions and perspective (Knott 2018). The three "frames" offer different perspectives of Hamilton as an individual (Knott 2018). However, *Hamilton* offers "frames" for other characters and the US constitution that differ from historical articles. Therefore, *Hamilton's* "framework" is a hybrid between education and entertainment, history and musical theatre (Jackson 2017).

III. METHOD

a. Multimodal Analysis

The multimodal analysis is a great way to explore the use of representation in *Hamilton*. A multimodal analysis collects and understands qualitative data in various forms of information (Dicks 2020). Dicks highlighted three essential principles, which includes semiotics, pragmatics and phenomenology (Dicks 2020). Projects often enquire about social, anthropological, or linguistic perspectives (Rens 2021). Throughout the book, Dicks introduced terminologies such as lens, mode, data, discourse, medium, and materials as an overview of ways researchers interacted with multimodality in the past (Dicks 2020). The multimodal analysis looks at three elements for music conceptualisation, including sound, lyrics, and visuals (Rens 2021). To look at representation in *Hamilton*, visuals play a crucial role. Conceptualising the visuals in *Hamilton* through Disney+ streaming service allows multiple viewings using digital media, deriving from traditional multimodal practices. The film documentation format does not provide the authentic experience of witnessing a live-Broadway performance (Lee 2020). However, the form offers consistency in portrayal and viewing. Thus, the multimodal analysis of visuals, specifically regarding casting and movements through the Disney+ streaming service, attempts to cover the examples of representation in *Hamilton*.

IV. ANALYSIS

a. Characters and Casting Choices

Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda explained his choice to cast diverse actors and actresses as retelling the story “about America then, told by America now” (Miranda et al. 2020). Based on America’s heavily debated history of the founding fathers, “America then” consists of ten members who were all white (Ellis 2007). “America then” was not very inclusive; slavery was debated rather than abolished. The *Hamilton* musical claims to be the “America now”, explaining that the founding fathers are not the only ones that shape America. America consists of citizens, residents, immigrants and more, coming from different backgrounds (Spiro 2008). They all shape America. The musical aims to tell the shaping of America and the not-so-recognised story of Alexander Hamilton (Miranda et al. 2020). The musical’s project focuses on “America now” in many ways but primarily through choosing a diverse cast (Kohn 2020).

Despite the musical’s focus on Alexander Hamilton’s story, the most significant example of representation is the white character, President George Washington, played by Christopher Jackson, an African-American actor (Barkaman and Wall 2017). Although the portrayal of a black American president is nothing new (Sachleben and Yenerall 2012), portraying a character based on a real person comes with different pressure. Of course, the critiques regarding historical accuracy does not come as a shock. However, the intentional casting choice means more than just for public amusement. The “President of America” title is often discussed as the most influential title in the world (Sachleben and Yenerall 2012). In reality, the first performance occurred in 2015, the same time President Obama was in office (Barkaman and Wall 2017). Since Obama was the first African-American president and the president of America at the time, casting Christopher Jackson, an African-American actor, as the president in the musical paints the parallel between reality and in theatre (Miranda et al. 2020). The casting of Jackson in the musical while Obama was the president in office exposes Miranda’s “America now” vision (Miranda et al. 2020). However, other characters, along with their casting, might not have the same obvious reasoning (Kohn 2020).

Some actors/actresses take on more than one character where the second role aligns with the first role or is entirely contrasting. An example would be Daveed Diggs, a half African-American and half white Jewish (Hoffman 2015), playing Lafayette and Jefferson off-Broadway, on Broadway and in *Hamilton* film on Disney+. The character Marquis de Lafayette is a French immigrant in America and a friend of Alexander Hamilton. In contrast, Thomas Jefferson is considerably Alexander Hamilton’s opponent after returning from France (Knott 2018). Lafayette’s character focuses on the topic of immigration (Galella 2018), and

Jefferson's character focuses on the subject of slavery, both characters emphasising nationalism. With Lafayette's portrayal as an immigrant and Jefferson as an elitist, the two characters require one actor to nail both portrayals. The two characters also need charisma, intensity in rapping, and energetic movements to execute their portrayals. The choice for mixed-race actors for the two-role package is to emphasise immigration and the historical context from ethnic backgrounds.

Casting Latino or mixed-raced actors to play the role of Hamilton preserves the character's portrayal as being an "immigrant". A Latino or mixed-race actor always plays the role of Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was born in Nevis, a Caribbean island and received help from the locals to study in America (history.com n.d.). As the main character, Miranda's interpretation of Alexander Hamilton is an ambitious yet flawed human being (Knott 2018). Hamilton's background includes being an orphan, falling into labour at eleven, writing about a hurricane at St. Croix, which gained attention from the locals, and being sent to New York to study (history.com n.d.). Highlighting the struggles and success of a Latin American, who then became one of the founding fathers and the first secretary of treasury of America, needs Latin American actors to portray the character justice (Galella 2018).

The casting choices in *Hamilton* is significant as the ethnicity "represents" certain cultural aspects in American history (Galella 2018). The reason for non-white actors/actresses casts for the roles ties to certain cultural "representation" throughout either dance or music history. An example would be African-American or Latina actresses to play Angelica Schuyler due to the character's main song having a rap and hip hop style. Other main characters, except for King George III, require rap and beatboxing skills for the roles. As hip-hop emerged from an African-American scene (Chang 2005), Latino hip hop growing from New York City (Wheeler 2016), and *Hamilton's* setting in and around Manhattan, the casting choices meet the proper "representation" requirement. The ensembles, however, allow anyone to play the roles as long as they match the skills and characteristics *Hamilton* requires (Deerwester 2016). *Hamilton* grew from a project to an award-winning production. *Hamilton* welcomed actors and actresses of all ethnicities to audition and incorporating historical and cultural context into the production (Deerwester 2016).

b. Representation Through Movement and Design

Despite each character having their own unique touch, such as Hamilton with the colour green and Hercules Mulligan using a beanie, the costume design as a whole explores their interpretation of America. The costume emphasises the "America then" story, and any exposed areas, such as faces and hair, represent "America now". The set of *Hamilton* occurs roughly in

the 18th century to early 19th century (Vankin 2017), the period of America's detachment from Britain while focusing on gender, sexuality and status (Haulman 2011c). Basing mainly on the 18th century, the fashion involves corsets for women and wigs for men (Haulman 2011b). Therefore, the fashion highlights the different ways of dressing according to gender and sexuality to achieve a certain status (Haulman 2011a). *Hamilton* incorporates minimal embroidery that could distract the colours, narrative and performance but keeps the main elements of the 18th-century fashion with the wigs as an exception (Pacheco 2016). In *Hamilton*, the costume highlights "America now" by losing the wigs, revealing the cast's faces from the shoulder up and staying true to the 18th-century fashion of America from the shoulders down (Pacheco 2016). The fashion choice acknowledges "America then" as the main story and "America now" as the storytellers using the integration of the modernised 18th century (Pacheco 2016). Having the cast as "America now" dressed in "America then" fashion reveals Miranda's perspective and strongly highlight the musical's representation objective.

Both costuming and set design support highlighting movements and the cast with attention to mechanics. The costuming for the *Hamilton* musical requires flexibility and practicality for performance (Harbert 2018). Despite following the elements of 18th-century fashion, *Hamilton* fashion incorporates a modern twist for the costume design that resembles steampunk fashion (Pacheco 2016). Steampunk, based on movies and animation, refers to a subgenre in literature, arts, fashion and lifestyle (최유진 2013). Corsets for female ensembles and sleeveless shirts provide a highlight on arm movements and efficiently executed quick changes (Pacheco 2016). The steampunk inspiration portrays an industrial age, and the sense of "mechanical" supports building a nation, an idea that is the focus of *Hamilton*. The mechanical aspect does not end with fashion. Although the fashion allows the casts to articulate hard-hitting movements, the products incorporate a spinning stage to extend the imagery. The rotating stage emphasises certain "pictures" such as the "hurricane", the duel scene (Dingfelder 2018). Stage performance cannot replicate dramatic effects such as close-ups. The rotating stage provides compensation for close-ups. Although *Hamilton's* Broadway film allow filming techniques, the rotating table provides more creativity for dance movements, staging formation and flow between scenes. In some scenes, the rotating stage executes pictures that resemble museum displays which could emphasise the history element of the performance.



Figure 1. The image shows the movement from “The Room Where It Happens” scene which resembles Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” dance. The actor in the image is Leslie Odom Jr. playing the role of Aaron Burr. From *A ‘Hamilton’ Star’s Story: How Leslie Odom Jr. Became Aaron Burr, Sir*, by The New York Times, 2016. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/theater/a-hamilton-stars-story-how-leslie-odom-jr-became-aaron-burr-sir.html>)

Hamilton’s overall movement works in parallel with the music (Searcy 2018). Although sometimes the movements and the music emphasises certain aspects, the movements and the music stand on their own (Searcy 2018). The most significant example would be the jazz dance style in “The Room Where it Happens” while incorporating cultural references (Paulson 2016). The sound and the lyrics represent Burr’s ambition to receive acknowledgement and desire to be included in the Hamilton-Madison-Jefferson negotiation. However, the dance focuses on the jazz dance styles with isolation and precise movements and the swaying of the hips (Guarino and Oliver 2014). Burr was born in Newark, New Jersey (Isenberg 2007), a city rich with jazz performances (Baraka 2009). The historical context supports the decision for the jazz style and the cultural references embedded in the dance sequence. There is a particular pose as shown in Figure 1 by Burr and the ensemble that resembles movement from Michael Jackson, the King of Pop’s “thriller dance” (Galella 2018). Rather than just historical incorporation, the

chosen dance pose and movement also acknowledge a popular cultural reference of Michael Jackson, an African-American artist. The iconic zombie-like “thriller” move could represent how society is corrupted by capitalism and gets driven by status, applicable to “America then” and “America now” (Galella 2018). In terms of representation, the movements through the jazz dance style represent African-American roots. Thus, incorporating cultural references and historical context into the movement provide the context of “America now” based on “America then”.

c. **Hamilton: Politics, Society and Controversies**

Representation in *Hamilton* is integral to reflect on political and societal topics. The characterisation is fundamental for representation with the help of movement, design and casting. The elements mentioned explores the framing location of communicators and text in *Hamilton*. In the case of Thomas Jefferson, the role reminds us that slavery existed in “America then” and still exist in new forms in “America now”, despite the prohibition in American law (Gorsuch 2018). The role of Jefferson requires the characterisation of being elite, entitled, powerful, and the historical figure is well-known for his ownership over slaves (Ellis n.d.). Jefferson, a historical figure against black people, being played by a half African-American and half white-Jewish actor, twists the portrayal of the character despite having the same characteristics. The real Thomas Jefferson most likely would have disproved the twist. To support the same characteristic claim despite the representation, movements such as strutting and chin up projects class and confidence, similar to how the actual historical figure would move (Ross 2016). Jefferson’s costume design supports the elitist characterisation with purple (Pacheco 2016), a semiotic and visual cue representing wealth (Kauppinen-Räsänen and Jauffret 2018). In “What’d I Miss”, the incorporation of jazz and swing dance styles such as isolation, hip-swaying and strong lines explores the genre’s roots to African-American culture. The casting, however, is not to say that slavery is still an integral part of “America now” but is to say that slavery still exists in different forms (Semuels 2015). With the example of Jefferson, we can see the significance of characterisation for representation with the help of movement, design and casting and the twist of “America then” characterisation portrayed by “America now”.

Two other locations of the concept of framing lie in the receivers and culture, which touches on the topic of immigration and the American identity. For *Hamilton*, the receivers are the audience, however they view the show, and the culture is the representation. *Hamilton* received multiple critiques about historical inaccuracy (Kohn 2020). However, Miranda believes that the only way to be inclusive for all Americans is to expose what “America now”

looks like instead of “America then” (Miranda et al. 2020). The best way to know how the audience frame *Hamilton* is to look at America’s presidents’ thoughts about the show. Former President Obama certainly enjoyed it; he even invited the cast to perform at the White House (Smith 2016). When former Vice President Pence went to see the show, he received unpleasant acknowledgement from the audience (Lind 2016). The controversy escalated when Brandon Dixon, who played Aaron Burr at the time, delivered a speech on behalf of the show to Pence (Lind 2016). Dixon’s speech is considered a political statement made by actors rather than politicians, which escalated the controversial scene (Lind 2016). Former President Trump used the event as a method to downgrade the *Hamilton* production (Lind 2016). However, it was reasonably apparent that Trump was against immigration through and through whether the event occurred or not. However, despite the “Boycott Hamilton” campaign that came after the event, *Hamilton* is by no means a political statement but to reiterate America’s history and issues such as immigration, slavery, and representation (Keller 2018). *Hamilton* aims to offer representation when it is due and to tell the story of “America then” as told by “America now” (Miranda et al. 2020).

V. Conclusion

The research regarding *Hamilton's* casting, design, and movement choices while incorporating American history explores the issue of representation. The study suggests the focus on representation using the concept of framing and multimodal analysis, specifically regarding the visuals in *Hamilton*. The research analysis *Hamilton* in film form through the Disney+ streaming service offers replay and consistency in viewings. The production incorporates many semiotics through design and movements, which acknowledges historical, cultural and social references. In *Hamilton*, design and movements, despite how strong they are, function as support for the musical's main objective regarding representation. Miranda believes in the importance of representation in *Hamilton* as the musical tells the story of "America then" by "America now". As representation and the format of musical theatre prevents historical accuracy, the story of Alexander Hamilton comes in different versions. *Hamilton* as a musical is acknowledged as an upbeat version of the founding father based on the biography by Chernow. Miranda portrays Hamilton as an ambitious orphan that struggles with flaws, just as any humans are. Miranda aims to humanise the historical figures to offer a connection between society and history. Miranda's project hopes to inspire, especially young people of America, to do further research, continue telling the narrative and offer opportunities for actors and actresses from different ethnic backgrounds in Broadway. There hasn't been much research on history musicals and politics, despite the popularity and exposure, especially through Broadway. Specifically for *Hamilton*, having it streamed on Disney+ means the production is more accessible for the public with a larger audience scope. With a large audience scope, *Hamilton* has the potential to shape people's perception of American history and the societal issue of representation.

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