

The Contrapalatization of Hip-Hop in American Theatre

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...What?

*"To cast us in the role of mimics is to deny us our own competence."*¹

The Ground Upon Which I Stand

August Wilson, 1996

In 1991, a company named Soundscan provided the ability to accurately record and digitize record sales, giving the music industry a big reality check.² Rap music was taking the charts by storm, far more than they had ever expected, which led to the industry scrambling to get behind this new wave. Since then, Hip-Hop culture and Rap music have both permeated almost every industry: theatre, fashion, sports, film, art and many more. From hip-hop's inception in the Bronx in 1973 to the entirety of the US in 2024, Hip-Hop has served as a tool for Black youth to reclaim agency over their voices, their stories, and their lives. However, since the industry's investment in Hip-Hop, the art form has been subject to the assimilation, manipulation, and dilution of its original purpose and its original creators, all for the express purposes of marketability and profit.

As a Chicano theatremaker, musician, and student, I have constantly questioned the ways in which Hip-Hop has been inserted into the distinctly Eurocentric artform of the "professional" theatre and have been consistently left disappointed at the answers I find. The

1) August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand" (11th Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference, June 26, 1996), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.

2) Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 15.

world of the American theatre has a wide core of institutional problems that have caused my frustration, ranging from the theatre's economic barriers in allowing access for lower-income communities, to the racial hurdles Black theatremakers have to face in the institution of the theatre and especially, the dilution and co-optation of Black culture, stories and art. While the dilution of a culture and its practices has been called cultural appropriation, white-washing, or co-optation, I propose the word "*contrapalatization*" as the descriptor for these actions when regarding culture-specific artforms such as hip hop. This paper shall look at Lin Manuel-Miranda's *Hamilton* as the case study in which *contrapalatization* can be defined, explained, and applied to the contemporary theatre world. I build on the work of W.E.B DuBois, August Wilson and the plethora of Black theatremakers, musicians and scholars who have long seen the issues facing Black people and Black culture within theatre in hopes of creating a more radically acceptant future for the next generations.

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Contrapalatization?

In the development of the word *contrapalatization*, I took a deep dive into etymology and linguistics in order to get the right combination of prefixes, suffixes and root words to accurately reflect this practice. The first section of the word is *contra-*, a prefix which means opposite or against. The following is *palatable* – a word which means "pleasant to taste" in regards to food or drink, or alternatively, "acceptable or satisfactory" in regards to an action or proposal. The root word of palatable is palate, which in the figurative sense means "agreeable

to the mind or feelings"³ We then take the suffix *-ize*, which means "to make or treat in a certain way." and lastly follow up with the suffix *-ation*, which describes when something is "connected with an action or process." Altogether, this leaves us with;

con·tra·pa·la·ti·za·tion

[contrapalatization]

NOUN

1. The intentional action or process of working against the agreeable methods of a cultural artform to make palatable to Eurocentricity.

Throughout my process of creating this word and looking at the reasoning behind its development, the question arose why I simply do not use the term "cultural appropriation"⁴ for this concept I am describing? In truth, *contrapalatization* is a form of cultural appropriation, but it goes a step further in describing a very specific form of cultural appropriation that often goes unnoticed and is indescribable without this terminology. Let us look at the definition of cultural appropriation in comparison to *contrapalatization*.

cul·tur·al ap·pro·pri·a·tion

[cultural appropriation]

NOUN

1. The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society

3) "Definition of PALATABLE," www.merriam-webster.com, n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/palatable>.

4) Emily Kendall, "Cultural Appropriation | Definition, History, Types, & Examples | Britannica," www.britannica.com, October 14, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cultural-appropriation>.

I have identified the following three main differences between the two terms.

- 1) *Contrapalatzation* is an intentional action, not typically unacknowledged like cultural appropriation.
- 2) Cultural appropriation describes an adoption of practices, *contrapalatzation* goes further in describing the dilution and restructuring of the practice itself to benefit Eurocentricity.
- 3) Contrapalatzation focuses on who the act is committed for (white society) rather than who it is committed by.

With the creation of this word, I present a new vocabulary to critique the ways in which Black people, Black culture and Black artistry must navigate the hoops and hurdles of Eurocentric artistic spaces. In time, the aim is to no longer be in a space where Black artistry needs to face the effects of *contrapalatzation* in order to be in these spaces. As we provide a new lens in which we can identify the root issue, we work towards this goal one step at a time.

...

Black Theatre

The conversation around the creation and reclamation of Black art and culture is widespread and varied. Since the 1920's, Black theatremakers and scholars have debated the methods and practices in which Black Theatre should be created and presented. From complete assimilation into Eurocentricity to a strict rejection of Western theatre stories and style, there have been many varying ideas of what Black Theatre should look like. W.E.B DuBois shares a

prime example of Black artistic reclamation of the theatre in his 1926 manifesto *Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre*. He states how “The plays of a real Negro theatre must be:

1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is.
2. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today.
3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.
4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.”⁵

DuBois’ and the theatremakers who formed the Krigwa Players Theatre struggled to find stories about Black lives and experiences, written and produced by Black people in Black neighborhoods for Black audiences, much less so in the theatre. He acknowledged how there were Black actors doing good work across the US, but faulted them for side-stepping true artistic reclamation. “For instance, some excellent groups of colored amateurs are entertaining colored audiences in Cleveland, in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Almost invariably, however, they miss the real path. They play Shakespeare or Synge or reset a successful Broadway play with colored principals”⁶ Since the 1920’s, for DuBois, merely inserting Black people into white stories or white characters does not truly equate itself to Black Theatre, it must be Black from the roots to the leaves.

5) W.E.B DuBois “‘Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre’” (The Crisis 32(3), 1926): 134–36.

6) DuBois, 134

In 1996, August Wilson was giving a speech at Princeton University where he called out the issues with colorblind casting and those who use it. He states how:

“Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists who view their American culture, rooted in the icons of European culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection. It is inconceivable to them that life could be lived and enriched without knowing Shakespeare or Mozart. Their gods, their manners, their being, are the only true and correct representations of humankind. They refuse to recognize black conduct and manners as part of a system that is fueled by its own philosophy, mythology, history, creative motif, social organization, and ethos.”⁷

Wilson was adamant in his distaste for white dominance and Black erasure, even more so than Dubois was. He argues that not only is it doing a disservice to Black people, the erasure of them within white roles can be violent. Both DuBois and Wilson see that the root issue lies in the Eurocentricity that is held over the theatre, leading to the restriction of what Black theatre could truly be.

The lack of recognition for Black stories has been a place of much needed growth for close to 100 years, and yet the Eurocentric hold over the theatre still rings true. In 2019, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) published its 2016-2017 annual report on diversity both on Broadway and Off-Broadway productions in New York. What they came to find was that “Caucasian playwrights wrote a whopping 86.8% of all shows produced in the 2016-17 season and Caucasian directors were hired for 87.1% of all productions.”⁸ If one statistic is not

7) August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” (11th Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference, June 26, 1996), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>

8) The Asian American Performers Action Coalition, “Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages,” AAPAC NYC, March 2019, http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_2016-2017_report.pdf.

enough, for their 2017-2018 annual edition, the New York Times reported that “About 20 percent of shows in the 2017-18 season on Broadway and Off Broadway stages were created by people of color... Nearly two-thirds of roles were filled by white actors on Broadway, and about 94 percent of directors were white”.⁹ The critique that I pose, that has been posed by both DuBois and Wilson before, is how are we able to create tangible changes in representation when we are so far removed from the table that we can’t even try? How do we begin to try? As AAPAC so beautifully summarized, “We can’t begin to hold stakeholders responsible without statistics like these. The numbers speak for themselves.”¹⁰ It’s true, but even with the continual work done by disenfranchised people in the nearly 100 years since DuBois declared his manifesto, the need for Black Theatre to be “about us, by us, for us and near us”¹¹ continues to ring true as ever, while the same mistakes continue to be repeated.

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Hip-Hop & Rap

Since its inception in 1973, Hip-Hop has been a cornerstone of Black youth culture in America. Birthed in the Bronx at a time where the environment was plagued with social, economic and political issues, Black youth developed Hip-Hop and its artistic mediums to

9) Sarah Bahr, “White Actors and Directors Still Dominate Broadway Stages, Report Finds,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2020, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/01/theater/new-york-theater-diversity-report.html>.

10) The Asian American Performers Action Coalition, “Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages,” AAPAC NYC, March 2019, http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_2016-2017_report.pdf.

11) W.E.B DuBois “‘Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre’” (*The Crisis* 32(3), 1926): 134–36.

convey their experiences and struggles with the world around them. Black and Brown youth were able to create what author and journalist Jeff Chang terms “a revolutionary aesthetic”.¹² He states how “B-Boying, DJing, MCing and Graffiti... were about unleashing youth style as an expression of the soul unmediated by corporate money, unauthorized by the powerful.”¹³ Prior to the Eurocentric music industry injecting itself to the culture, Hip-Hop was defined by the Black and Brown youth who created it, allowing Black youth being able to write and tell their own stories and narratives. Tricia Rose puts it best in her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, where she states, “Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America.”¹⁴ However, in the years since Rap music hit the mainstream, there has been a stray away from these original tenets of Hip-Hop. Whether it be the push to appeal to a wider multi-cultural audience, the insertion of white people in informing the culture or the industry’s hand in rappers assimilating to white societal expectations, Hip-Hop has faced a variety of challenges in retaining its original purpose. Trica Rose goes further in her book, stating how:

“Given the racially discriminatory context within which cultural syncretism takes place, some rappers have equated white participation with a process of dilution and subsequent theft of black culture. Although the terms dilution and theft do not capture the complexity of cultural incorporation and syncretism, this interpretation has more than a grain of truth in it. There is abundant evidence that white artists imitating black

12) Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop : A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), 111.

13) Chang, 111

14) Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2.

styles have greater economic opportunity and access to larger audiences than black innovators.”¹⁵

Regardless of the various roadblocks, there are still many people who fight for the reclamation of Hip-Hop’s true purpose, to “give a sub-marginalized group the opportunity to assert its voice”¹⁶

The Musical That Shall Not Be Named, It Shall Be Called Out

Hamilton. The musical that is lauded as the Founding Father of Hip-Hop to the professional theatre world. Written in 2015 by Lin Manuel-Miranda, Hamilton is regarded by many as one of the most successful theatre productions of all time. It tells the story of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton throughout his rise in US government, ultimately leading to his death. In devising this musical, Miranda chooses to stray away from typical showtunes, choosing instead to bring in “rap” into the technical structure of the music and production. He is quoted saying “It was a no-brainer for me to take hip-hop into theatre because of course it could bring storytelling as well as music.”¹⁷ In addition to implementing aspects of Black culture, Miranda opted for color-conscious casting, bringing in an almost entirely BIPOC cast to play these historical white characters. While Lin’s choices regarding music and casting have been

15) Rose, 134

16) Lakeyta M Bonnette, *PULSE of the PEOPLE : Political Rap Music and Black Politics*. (S.L.: Univ Of Pennsylvania Pr, 2018), 14.

17) Jane Graham, “Lin-Manuel Miranda: ‘It Was a No-Brainer to Take Hip-Hop into Theatre,’” *The Big Issue*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.bigissue.com/culture/lin-manuel-miranda-it-was-a-no-brainer-to-take-hip-hop-into-theatre/>.

celebrated for its “inclusivity” by those within the professional theatre world, I argue that Hamilton is the exact kind of *contrapalatable* play that W.E.B DuBois and August Wilson were adamantly against.

To begin, we have the use of Hip-Hop aesthetic and style being adapted to the Eurocentric form that is the musical. While it might seem a step towards inclusivity, I ask why does it need to be adapted and diluted for it to be successful? Why did it have to be taken out of the real context of Black culture and life and placed into a Eurocentric context? I argue that this is to appeal to white audiences, which in the theatre world equates to success. Tricia Rose discusses how “...white consumption of Hip-Hop - in this moment at least - has a strong likelihood of reproducing the long and ugly history of racial tourism that requires black people to perform whites desires in order to become successful in a predominantly white-pleasure - driven marketplace.”¹⁸ And even though most would be quick to dismiss these claims, it is a situation that has occurred multiple times throughout the generations, just modernized for the current day and age. Whether it be white people dressing up in Blackface or White kids wearing “ghetto” clothes, the appeal of Black culture has always led to problematic expressions, and Hamilton continues that legacy.

In addition to the music itself, we have the white-centric story line full of white characters, yet Miranda cast Black and Brown people in those roles for those stories. August

18) Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 232

19) August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” (11th Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference, June 26, 1996), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.

Wilson sums up the problem best in the following quote, ““To mount an all-black production of a Death of a Salesman or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans. It is an assault on our presence, and our difficult but honorable history in America; and it is an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large.”¹⁹ If we are going to put an effort to highlight Black actors and Black culture, we should not have to do it within the bounds of Eurocentric stories.

I am not the only person that has made the critique that Hamilton falls short in terms of casting and story, critics from across the US and beyond have started conversations and come to similar conclusions. Amanda Hooton from the Sydney Morning Herald stated how “The cast’s ethnic diversity has been criticised as an apologist’s view of history: that having a hugely charismatic, authoritative African-American actor like Chris Jackson play George Washington enabled (mostly wealthy, white audiences) to put aside their unease about the horrors of their history.”²⁰ Almost in polar opposite to the effect of minstrelsy in the US, where “The minstrel black man served as a kind of alter ego, providing whites with the vicarious experience of breaking free from the rigid restraints of ‘civilized’ European behavior and expressing their

20) Amanda Hooton, ““Our Own Form of Protest’: How Linking Hip-Hop and History Turned Hamilton into a Surprise Hit Musical,” The Sydney Morning Herald, February 21, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/theatre/our-own-form-of-protest-how-linking-hip-hop-and-history-turned-hamilton-into-a-surprise-hit-musical-20191223-p53mj8.html>.

21) Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

natural or, as they interpreted it, vulgar instincts.”²¹, we have the “dilution” of Black actors within the confines of a white character, freeing the white audience from dealing with their history further. Interestingly enough, slavery and racism, two core tenets of American society, are not addressed in the show. Chrishaun Baker, writer for ScreenRant, wrote how “a frequent criticism of the show is the whitewashing of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and Hamilton's part in it, the show feels less like a piece of informative historical theater and more like diversified wish fulfillment.”²²

Hamilton was not the sole creation of Miranda, outside of his contributions and faults, we must also look at the other key voices that shaped this piece. For example, the director of every professional Hamilton rendition done, Tommy Kail, sets a big tone for what the production ultimately looks like. Unfortunately, I believe that his presence and direction further *contrapalatinizes* the piece. He is quoted saying “In Alexander Hamilton, you have someone born into very difficult circumstances – profound poverty, no parents, no support – who used words to elevate himself out of those circumstances, and then died violently because of those words. That’s a classic hip-hop story. It’s the story of Tupac or Big.”²³ There are a variety of things that are problematic in this white director’s statement, but for now I will focus in on their expectations on what a “classic hip-hop story” is. In previous sections, I mentioned how Rap music serves as an outlet for Black youth to express their lived realities. Yet, here we have a

22) Chrishaun Baker, “Hamilton: Why the Musical Features Hip-Hop and Rap,” ScreenRant, July 12, 2020, <https://screenrant.com/hamilton-hamilfilm-rap-hiphop-reasons-why/>.

23) Surprise Hit Musical,” The Sydney Morning Herald, February 21, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/theatre/our-own-form-of-protest-how-linking-hip-hop-and-history-turned-hamilton-into-a-surprise-hit-musical-20191223-p53mj8.html>.

white director attempting to define what is or isn't Black culture. How is it that we have a white man watering down hip-hop as merely nothing more than a violent struggle story. How is it we are comparing one of the "Founding Fathers", one of the most privileged men in US history, to two Black artists who had to deal with the effects of colonization, imperialism and capitalism brought forth from those same Founding Fathers? At its best, its tone deaf, at its worst, it is a destructive erasure of colonial history.

... ..

Why the Long Critique?

Many have asked, why can you not enjoy the piece for what it is, why do you feel the need to "call out" Hamilton? Why attack Lin Manuel Miranda, aren't Brown people supposed to stick together? The answer is that we can do much better than has been shown to us, and if we do not expect more, we will be stuck with the halfway level of progress that has been offered to us. If we do not provide new lenses to address the issues at hand, these issues will not be addressed.

For example, theatremakers have long struggled with the execution of color-blind casting. Since the 1920's with DuBois, the 1960's with August Wilson and now with myself, color blind casting has consistently been called out as a detriment to Black theatre. August Wilson said it himself, "For a black actor to stand on the stage as part of a social milieu that has denied him his gods, his culture, his humanity, his mores, his ideas of himself and the world he lives in, is to be in league with a thousand naysayers who wish to corrupt the vigor and spirit of his

heart.”²⁴ Even if the director, writer or producer may not see the issue with this type of casting, it has a tangible effect on the depth the story can take. The Harvard Crimson reported that “The perils of color-blind casting in “Hamilton” are especially difficult to detect.”²⁵ because “...reserving space for BIPOC performers is only one element of a successful color-conscious approach. Effective color-conscious casting places greater responsibility on the writer, director, and casting directors to execute an in-depth evaluation of the cultural connotations of requesting an actor insert themselves into a narrative that is not their own.”²⁶ Creating an entire piece around the founding of this country yet ignoring the methods in which it was created is erosive. This paradox was not at the forefront of Lin Manuel Miranda’s vision, and the lack of cognition shows.

Aside from casting, the use of “rap” within this piece is a prime example of how cultural appropriation turns into contrapalation. When Miranda decided that Hip-hop would be his key to making this piece, he came in with the idea that “ ...hip hop is for everyone, that it represents a new moment of multicultural exchange where white consumption is no longer about racial consumption (no more white negroes, hip hop is the new multiculturalism)... [but] denies the fact that mainstream commercial hip-hop consumption has been propelled by the same images in terms of appropriation that have consistently shaped mainstream consumption

24) August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” (11th Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference, June 26, 1996), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.

25) Emi P. Cummings, “Unpopular Opinion: Color-Blind Casting Isn’t ‘Woke’ — It’s Racist,” The Harvard Crimson, December 9, 2020, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/12/9/unpop-opinion-color-blind-casting/>.

26) Cummings, 2020

of black style and music and that they take place under vast and entrenched forms of racial inequality”²⁷ The lack of consciousness in this regard goes to show that it was not Black folks who were supposed to benefit from this work, it was the white theatre audiences. Tricia Rose has stated in her book *Black Noise* how “...extensive white participation in black culture has also always involved white appropriation and attempts at ideological recuperation of black cultural resistance”²⁸ With *Hamilton*, we have the appropriation and with this paper, I aim to begin the ideological recuperation.

... • ...

To The Future...

*“We cannot accept these assaults. We must defend and protect our spiritual fruits. To ignore these assaults would make us derelict in our duties. We cannot accept them. Our political capital will not permit them.”*²⁹

The Ground upon Which I Stand

August Wilson, 1996

27) Surprise Hit Musical,” The Sydney Morning Herald, February 21, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/theatre/our-own-form-of-protest-how-linking-hip-hop-and-history-turned-hamilton-into-a-surprise-hit-musical-20191223-p53mj8.html>.

28) Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 5.

29) August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” (11th Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference, June 26, 1996), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.

As artists, as writers and as humans, we must do better for the future of Hip-Hop and Black theatre. First, we must recognize the multiple examples of contrapalatzation that are in display and practice within our industry. Whether it be the dilution of Black culture and music for White audiences, the casting of Black people in white characters or the infiltration of whiteness within Black artistry, contrapalatzation is a real issue for Black, Indigenous and Brown artists. Due to the widescale effects contrapalatzation has, It will take a lot of work to fight back against this system, but it is possible. August Wilson gives us a prime example of the ferocity we must attack these issues from his 1996 speech when he states

“The idea of colorblind casting is the same idea of assimilation that black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years. For the record, we reject it again. We reject any attempt to blot us out, to reinvent our history and ignore our presence or to maim our spiritual product. We must not continue to meet on this path. We will not deny our history, and we will not allow it to be made to be of little consequence, to be ignored or misinterpreted.”³⁰

Mr. Wilson was right almost 30 years ago, and his words still stand true today. When we are able to reclaim agency of our culture and create for ourselves, rather than create for the Eurocentric theatre world, that is when we truly begin finding liberation, one piece of theatre and hip-hop at a time.

30) August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” (11th Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference, June 26, 1996), <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>.

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Appendix

con·tra·pa·la·ti·za·tion

[contrapatization]

NOUN

1. The action or process of working against the satisfactory methods of a cultural artform to make palatable to Eurocentricity.

con·tra·pa·la·ta·ble

[contrapalatable]

ADJECTIVE

con·tra·pa·la·tize

[contrapatize]

VERB

con·tra·pa·la·tiz·ing

[contrapatizing]

VERB

con·tra·pa·la·ta·bly

[contrapalatably]

ADVERB

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