

“ONCE AGAIN BACK IS THE INCREDIBLE”: HIP-HOP SAMPLING AND MATERIAL MEMORY

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In the book *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (2004), Joseph Schloss outlines the act of “digging in the crates,” explaining the process in which hip-hop producers and deejays engage of tirelessly searching through countless boxes of old records with the hopes of unearthing a rare treasure: A previously untapped reservoir of unique samples that will set a producer’s composition apart from the rest. This method of cultural excavation is a fundamental aspect of hip-hop, as the genre relies on these sonic and material archives to compose new beats. At the same time, these material artefacts, these vinyl records passionately scoured for by producers and deejays, act as forms of cultural memory through which elements of the past are evoked into the present.

In this paper, I will explore links between cultural memory, material culture, and popular music. I argue that music is deeply connected to various forms of memory: cultural, social, and personal, and one way in which music and memory interact is through materiality. To support this argument, I will analyse the material culture of hip-hop, and the ways in which sampling (the act of locating and isolating various audio fragments and manipulating them in order to fit a new musical or audio composition) represents an engagement with both material culture and cultural memory. I contend that, through sampling, producers collaborate with a material form of music (the record) to conjure up elements of the past, making the past relevant within the present, and influencing possible moves towards the future.

Material Culture

Theorists of material culture contend that objects not only act as tools for the use of living organisms, but that they also become extensions of ourselves, shaping our perceptions and experiences of the world. Regarding cultural production, Tim Ingold (2010) argues that material objects have as much agency in the artistic process as the artist/producer. He claims that, while agency is often theorized to be solely found within the producer, the material used for a work of art directs the artist in how the object is created. The skill of the “practitioner,” he argues, is not solely



found in their ability to force a preconceived idea upon material, but rather, “in their ability to find the grain of the world’s becoming and to follow its course while bending to their evolving purpose” (Ingold 2010: 92). Through the practitioner’s reciprocal encounter with the material, their perception is changed; the typical subject/object dichotomy is switched, with the practitioner becoming the object of the material subject (ibid: 95). Carl Knappett argues similarly, acknowledging agency for the material. In *Thinking Through Material Culture* (2005), Knappett asserts that the living organism and material are not completely separate. Rather, the object intertwines with the organism on a perceptual, cognitive, social, and psychological level shaping how they experience and conceive of the world (Knappett 2005: 17-18).

Knappett also points to how material culture helps to create symbolic maps of meaning in which people locate themselves. He likens a culture’s material assemblage to a sort of language in which one needs to be immersed to understand their symbolic codes (ibid: 7). In “Exhausted Commodities” (2000), Will Straw analyses this material culture through the lens of popular music. With a focus on vinyl records, Straw considers how records maintain cultural value and significance after their economic value has decreased on the first-hand market by persisting and circulating through various cultural circles and second-hand markets like thrift shops and yard sales. This build-up of exhausted commodities creates a cultural framework and archive, representing an assemblage of cultural memory in material form upon which people draw. Iain A. Taylor (2020) argues that, although these commodities may have become “exhausted” in an economic sense, they are reimbued with cultural meaning and value once they are taken up again by collectors. These commodities, these records, hold social and cultural significance, and once a collector imbues the commodity with personal value, they locate themselves within the record’s cultural history.

Straw (2012) contends that there are two distinct ways of analysing the materiality of music. First, he articulates that the material objects involved in the creation, recording, or consumption of music, or objects surrounding the music, can act as an analytical point. Second, he indicates the materiality of musical sound as a site of analysis, pointing to theorists like Jacques Attali (1977) and Lawrence Grossberg (1984, 1986, 1992). In this short paper, I will attempt to bridge the two. Taking cues from material culture, I will depict the ways in which the records themselves are key in shaping the producer’s musical composition, and how these compositions, in turn, act to transmit forms of cultural and social memory.

Memory Studies

As with material culture studies, memory studies also considers various forms of materiality, and in particular, the ways in which the material world interacts with personal and collective memory. The philosopher Henri Bergson, in the formative memory studies text *Matter and Memory* (1919) theorises that memory and the material world are intimately linked. Bergson asserts that there is no memory without experience, and there is no experience without perception, perception that is brought about through interaction with objects and other physical bodies. These moments of perception and object interaction subconsciously embed collections of images and encounters from which we draw. However, memory is not simply an inactive storehouse of images and past experiences to pull from. For Bergson, memory is actively evoked into the present and, through interaction with the body, becomes “a synthesis of past and present with a view to the future” (Bergson 1919: 294).

Memory, however, is not solely located within the individual but, rather, is transmitted throughout and between distinct social spheres. Maurice Halbwachs (1980) articulates the concept of the collective memory, claiming that all individuals are located within social milieus, and

thus, individual memories are always positioned within an assemblage of collective memories. In this way, individual memories are never completely isolated, but are deeply embedded within and influenced by social and collective circumstances. For Halbwachs, these forms of social memory are transmitted locally, through interpersonal interactions like rituals and traditions, and through subtle cues like body language.

While Halbwachs argues that collective memory is communicated primarily within the immediate social sphere, Jan Assmann (1995, 2011) considers how the transfer of memory transcends the local setting, and travels across space and time. Assmann asserts that while Halbwachs' theory is important, it is only part of the discussion, especially in the rapidly changing technological and cultural landscape that was the 20th century. He theorises the concept of "cultural memory," a form of memory that is not tied to an enclosed social/cultural sphere. Rather, cultural memory refers to the set of objects, images, and cultural forms that articulate and communicate the identity and history of a group, area, era, and/or social setting:

Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorised, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. External objects as carriers of memory play a role already on the level of personal memory. Our memory, which we possess as beings equipped with a human mind, exists only in constant interaction not only with other human memories but also with "things," outward symbols. (Assmann 2011: 110-111)

These cultural "things" that Assmann refers to are considered objectified cultural forms: cultural forms that are tangible, observable, and, while not solely solid objects (as types like songs fall under this category), can be considered discernibly shaped and extant.

Many scholars have considered the ways in which memory interacts with objectified cultural forms (see, for instance, Dijck 2007, Erll and Rigney 2009, Hoskins 2011, Landsberg 2004, Sturken 2009, Young 2000). While the theories and forms studied by these scholars are vast and nuanced, a common thread is that cultural memory and objects are complexly entangled. Objects act as means of narrativising the cultural history, identity, and circumstances of a group. They allow for the transmission of memory between distinct communities both spatially and temporally, through what Lucy Bond (2017) refers to as mobile memory or, what Astrid Erll (2011) calls travelling memory. Memory, though often historically theorised as something self-contained and static, is alive, constantly travelling, shifting, and resurfacing in the present at different conjunctures for myriad purposes. Walter Benjamin asserts the political importance of seizing upon a memory "as it flashes in a moment of danger" (1940, 2010). This moment, which Benjamin refers to as the dialectical image, is the instant when an image of the past flashes up during a moment of the present. It is through the dialectic between past and present that people can be moved forward ideologically, to be mobilised towards political change.

Hip-Hop and Material Memory

There is an important connection between material culture and hip-hop. In *Making Beats* (2004), Joseph Schloss dives into the history of hip-hop with a specific focus on the practice of sampling and its status as a fundamental aesthetic and compositional method of the genre. Beginning in the Bronx, New York, in the 1970s, hip-hop was essentially born in local parties and dance clubs during which a deejay would isolate a break in a recording (a primarily rhythmic instrumental moment in a

song that the crowd could easily dance to) by looping that part of the record between two different turntables (playing the break on one turntable and, once it was over, playing it on the other turntable and switching between the two). Sampling, Schloss argues, is the logical evolution from this procedure: the process of isolating a specific moment of a recording and placing it within a new context. The advent of sampling technology took this method to a new level, allowing for the isolation of multiple elements from prior recordings to be manipulated and glued together to make completely unique and complex compositions.

For the sake of brevity, I will not delve too deeply into the intricacies of the birth of hip-hop and hip-hop culture (for more on this see Hill Collins 2006, Neal 1999, Rose 1994, Watkins 2005). I will, however, turn to the importance of material culture in hip hop, and the ways in which a collection of records creates a Black cultural archive upon which producers draw in order to create unique musical compositions while also articulating and recontextualising Black cultural history and tradition into the present moment.

Memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg refers to memory as “the past made present” (2009: 3). I contend that sampling is a direct example of this. Sampling allows producers to interact with the past, actively contextualising earlier moments into the present to display their continuing relevance. Houston A. Baker Jr. (1991) argues that the active nature of sampling and deejaying works to reconstruct the texts of the archive – to reconfigure them into a shape that is tangible and meaningful within the present moment. He describes the act of deejaying (and by extension, sampling) as an active weaving of sounds together that “produced a rap DJ who became a postmodern, ritual priest of sounds rather than a passive spectator.” Baker asserts that this active nature of hip hop also speaks to its counter-hegemonic capabilities, referring to deejaying and sampling as a “deconstructive hybridity” (Baker 1991: 220) that challenges the “state line” through which hip hop is “an audible ... space of opposition” (ibid: 226).

Susan McClary continues this line of analysis. In her formative work on popular musical analysis, *Conventional Wisdom* (2000), she directly connects hip hop sampling to archival and cultural memory, asserting that the act of sampling shows the genre’s “obsession with cultural memory.” She claims that “one of the most important features of rap involves its intense concern with reference – the actual incorporation of moments from the history of recorded Black music, made possible through sampling.” This incorporation of history through the act of sampling depicts, for McClary, the “desire to transmit traces of the past as still-vibrant elements of the present” (McClary 2000: 160). This transmittal, I argue, is not solely done to maintain an archive for cultural reference. It is a way to maintain the continuing relevance of past challenges, struggles, and forms of resistance. Sampling acts as a means of recontextualising past forms of resistance and activism, articulating their importance for the current conjuncture and generation. Additionally, there is radical power in being able to seize state-line narratives and reconstruct them, to challenge their meaning, their hegemonic nature, and reform them into tools of political resistance for the historically disenfranchised.

Analysis: “Bring the Noise”

Joseph Schloss, through first-hand interviews of prominent hip hop producers, explains that there are a variety of concerns that producers have when picking records to use and store in their archives. What influences them during their “crate digging” excursions are not just the bands, composers, or the genres of the records, but also their total aesthetic: The image on the cover, the contents of the inner sleeve, the record’s overall style. What is found within these material objects are traces of the past, aspects of Black cultural expression, history, aesthetics, and politics. I

believe that the material of the record-object – the sounds that emanate from the grooves on the record, the images on the sleeve and the written content within – coalesce with the capabilities of the sampler to drive the producer towards their final composition. The archival aspects of the object are experienced sonically by the producer when the album is listened to. These sonics contain certain elements of cultural memory, materialised within the musical aesthetics of the composition. These elements are then seized by the producer, rearticulated and contextualised for the present composition. We see in this sense the past being made present. Through the synergy of technology and creativity, the producer seizes these moments of the past, manipulating them to fit the newly made beat. In this sense, samples of the past are reconstructed to fit not only the musical aesthetics of the new composition, but also the social, cultural, and political concerns of the present.

To display this process in action, I will provide a brief analysis of the Public Enemy song “Bring the Noise.” I argue that the song, through its sampling choices (as well as lyrics, vocal style, and other elements) is an example of what Cedric Robinson (1983, 2000) refers to as the Black Radical Tradition – an intergenerational tradition of resistance against the capitalist-imperialist exploitation of the African diaspora that has developed “a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality” (Robinson 2000: 171). I assert that Public Enemy’s “Bring the Noise” interacts with material objects of collective memory thus representing a continuation and evolution of this tradition of radical resistance.

The song begins with a sample from Malcolm X’s 1963 speech “Fire + Fury – Grass Roots Speech,” addressing the need to maintain Black militancy in the face of white supremacy and, specifically, fighting against white attempts to water down or co-opt Black revolutionary figures. The quote is simple: “Too Black, too strong,” but lends itself clearly to the Black Radical Tradition. By beginning the song with this speech, Public Enemy is immediately linking resistance movements of the past to the present moment, showing that, while the speech may have occurred in the 1960s, there was still a need for this radical activism in 1988, and that the issues raised by Malcolm X were still relevant.

Another key sample is from the Marva Whitney song “It’s my Thing”. Marva Whitney was an integral soul singer of the early days of soul and funk, also known as “Soul Sister #1.” The sample Public Enemy uses is taken from a longer horn line from the original song occurring at approximately 1:40. In “Bring the Noise,” the horn groove is intensified and acts as the driving melody through the verses. Whitney’s song is thematically about challenging hegemonic social norms. In the chorus, she says “It’s my thing/I can do what I wanna do / It’s my thing / You can’t tell me who to sock it to”. We can think about this as a direct challenge to dominant hegemonic narratives telling Whitney who she had to be, and how she had to act. The phrase “sock it to” in this context had a romantic or sexual connotation, so she is also fighting for sexual freedom. By sampling this song, Public Enemy is directly invoking the memory of its themes by using a specific moment of the horn section. Through intensifying this horn melody, they are maintaining the resistant nature of the original song but reassembling it into a form of direct action – The driving horn of the verse can be seen as a motivation towards political action. Additionally, we can consider the term “sock it,” and how its meaning changed over time to mean a punch or aggressive action. Public Enemy is invoking the memory and resistant nature of the song “It’s my Thing,” while rearticulating it into their present by making it feel more combative.

A sample from the Funkadelic song “Get Off your Ass and Jam” is another crucial element. The sample used – a high-pitched alarm-like sound – comes from the very beginning of Funkadelic’s piece. In “Bring the Noise,” the sample occurs at the beginning of the verse and lasts for two

measures and reappears after a two-measure break within a sixteen-measure verse, sounding akin to a continual alarm that begins the verse and reappears intermittently. It takes a similar form in the original song by acting as an alarm at the beginning. However, the alarm is used for different purposes in each piece. The Funkadelic song is primarily an instrumental song in which musical virtuosity and groove are the focal point. For Funkadelic, the alarm acts as a call to action for the audience to “get off your ass and jam.” Or in other words, to get up and dance and feel the groove. Public Enemy is taking this alarm and resignifying its meaning and purpose into a different type of call to action. Public Enemy’s call to action is to get up and fight, to engage in forms of radical resistance. The alarm – the call to action – for Public Enemy is ongoing and repeated, symbolising the need for continual action, to continually “get off” one’s “ass and jam.”

Lastly, at 1:21 Public Enemy invokes Reverend Jesse Jackson’s call to “Brothers and sisters” from the beginning of the Soul Children song “I Don’t Know What This World is Coming To,” a protest song in the genre of a Black Spiritual. Released in 1972, the Soul Children song is openly protesting the Vietnam War, calling for racial equality, and challenging various aspects of white supremacy and the hegemonic order of the time. We can hear an immediate arousing of the activist theme of this song and the call to community action through this sample. When the sample is played, rapper Chuck D simultaneously calls towards “brothers and sisters.” Here, we have the call to the community of 1972 coming into immediate relief with the call to community in 1988, in what I am dubbing as a form of dialectical sound in the Benjaminian sense. Through this moment, Public Enemy is concretely linking the past to the present – the issues that are sung about and challenged in “What is this World Coming to” in 1972 are still prevalent, taking similar yet unique forms in 1988.

Through this analysis, I contend that there are direct connections between material memory and the ways in which this form of memory manifests through sampling. Public Enemy’s producers – The Bomb Squad – utilised material objects from their past to maintain and reconstruct instances of collective memory, political activism, and cultural heritage. While my current analysis is relatively limited in understanding exactly how and in what ways The Bomb Squad was informed by certain elements of Black cultural iconography (like album covers, liner notes, and other various aesthetic components of the records and recordings they chose to use), I argue that their exposure to these Black cultural materials informed their use of samples and, specifically, connected to their sense of continuing political urgency and activism. These materials, and the technological objects with which the producers interacted, drove them forward in a particular direction, which we can see in the finished composition.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this paper, I analysed some ways in which cultural memory is housed in and evoked by objectified popular musical forms. I showed how cultural history and memory are called into the present through sampling and lyrics, and how this process can work to both continue and evolve prior forms of radical political activism. Although my analysis is linked immediately to the historical moment of 1988 – a time when sampling records was the primary means of attaining samples – I believe there are ways in which similar analysis could be utilised for the present moment. Since the height of Public Enemy’s prominence, there have been numerous ways in which the sampling process has evolved and grown. Producers now are not solely beholden to vinyl records for discovering their samples; they are able to access a seemingly endless array of songs and recordings (and by extension, forms of cultural memory) through the digitisation of music. Although the analysis of this digitisation is outside of my immediate scope, I believe this offers a clear avenue through which further theorisation and analysis of this topic could be done.

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