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Records that play: the present past in sampling practice

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Abstract

Much of the discourse surrounding sampling practice has been couched in an archaic rhetoric of originality and creativity, predicated on the reproductive mode of creation rather than the practice's own creative logic. These notions have emerged from a metaphysics which privileges the origin as the centre of semantic production. However, this discursive preoccupation with the past is not entirely irrelevant in sampling practice. Rather, the historically inscribed aura of the original holds a redefined, but necessary, place in the practice.

This essay examines the theoretical underpinnings of the discussion so far, then reconciling these with the specific culture of sample-based hip-hop production. Through close readings of some musical examples, it posits a theoretical framework for sampling practice which takes its unique properties into account. By mapping the trajectory of several samples from source to new incarnation, the sample is revealed as the space of simultaneous play and rupture, where the past both defines the present and is effaced by it. As such, sampling creates a tradition that involves the past without deferring to its structures and limitations, restoring a revised mode of agency to the practice.

Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities', even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 11–12)

I

Since the advent of sound recording, a suspicious binary has existed between live and recorded sound. Where live sound purportedly has presence, emanating from an interior, recorded sound is the phantasmal echo of that presence. Indeed, recorded sound undercuts the ontological priority of the interior over the sounded exterior. For many, the invention of the phonograph effaced the subject from the process of musical production: '… the phonograph marks the decisive separation between musical performance and human labor. Music became disembodied. The phonograph is indifferent to the physical presence of composer, performer, or audience' (Rothenbuler and Peters 1997, p. 245). Sound recording transmogrified music from a performance, inhabiting a specific space and time, into an object, freed from an origin. As recording technology occasioned the reification of sound, it provoked a deep cultural concern for the origin. The technological chasm between

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sound and its source was simultaneously celebrated and decried, oddly enough, as both facilitating and dissolving human agency.

In his essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', Walter Benjamin posits a potential paradigm shift, at least in the status given to the work of art, in the era of reproduction. He suggests that through technical reproducibility, the aura accorded to the singular inimitable artwork dissolves, by mere fact of the copy's existence and proliferation. He writes: 'One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in an age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art' (Benjamin 1936, p. 224). This aura is defined, he argues, by the ideal of authenticity over fakery, uniqueness over ubiquity. For Benjamin, the thrall of the aura is rooted in a ritualistic embrace of the origin. Technical reproducibility is a liberating mechanism, occasioning the democratisation of the artistic process and taking the artistic object out of the strictly demarcated museum space. The same logic applies to the sonic object, as the site of listening is moved within the home: 'Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record' (*ibid*., pp. 221–2).

Despite Benjamin's contention that the very fact of technical reproducibility disperses the aura of the work of art, the tenacious anthropological grip on the origin continues to inform discussion of sound recording and its aesthetic offshoots. In *The Tuning of the World*, R. Murray Schaefer coins the term 'schizophonia' to refer 'to the split between an original sound and its electroacoustical transmission or reproduction' (Schaefer 1977, p. 90). Schaefer's term is a response to a particular cultural moment defined, in many ways, by sound recording technologies. 'Intending it to be a nervous word', Schafer uses schizophonia to describe a world in which 'we have split the sound from the maker of the sound. Sounds have been torn from their natural sockets and given an amplified and independent existence. Vocal sound, for instance, is no longer tied to a hole in the head but is free to issue from anywhere in the landscape' (*ibid*., p. 90).

The panic underscoring Schaefer's term pervades much of the general discourse on authenticity, ownership and originality in sampling practice. In the era of sound reproduction, the aura of the musical object persists, preserved by legal and theoretical boundaries. Archaic notions of what it means to be creative and original continue to dog theoretical accounts of sampling practice. As such, the prevailing theoretical models of sampling practice tend to begin with the idea of the origin, or lack thereof. Semantic approaches to sampling have been predicated on the very idea of reproduction, focusing on the mode of creation rather than the practice's own creative logic. The prevalence of the origin, or rather, its dissolution, in discussion of sound recording, has made it easy to map the postmodern aesthetic model of pastiche onto sampling practice. In 'The death of the Author', Roland Barthes describes the postmodern extinction of the origin:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pecuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. The only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as to never rest on any one of them. (Barthes 1977, p. 146)

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As the origin fades from view, creation becomes defined by acts of recombination. This 'literature of exhaustion', so termed by John Barth in his essay of the same name, wherein existing modes of literary representation have been exhausted of creative possibility, seems to find an echo in discussions of sampling practice (Barth 1967). This makes it tempting to imagine sampling as the ultimate postmodern exercise, the soundtrack to the Author-God's death scene.

Much of the theoretical discourse generated around sampling practice uses existing literary and visual art to project a legible aesthetic paradigm onto the song-as-collage. Marcel Duchamp's moustachioed Mona Lisa, William Burroughs' cut-ups and Andy Warhol's soup cans have all served as aesthetic analogues, in their usage of 'found objects', to sampling practice. This apparent resemblance has prompted the invocation of intertextuality as a salient semantic model for sampled music. However, signification in image and text operates in a fundamentally different way than it does in music. The evanescence of sound and the semantic disparity and fluidity between musical signs and their ostensible meanings problematise the account of sampling as just another postmodern reiteration of the death of the Author. The sonic removal to a new context registers in a way foreign to image or text, given the possible temporal suspension of images and texts. Music, image and text are instantiated in the world in essentially different ways, particularly with respect to time, as Thomas Porcello notes: 'One must remember that even with a published recording, the sound itself is of a transitory nature. It exists at points in time, but does not exist through time in the manner that a colour in a painting does' (Porcello 1991, p. 87). Moreover, in literary and visual art, the history or aura of the quoted image or text is integral to the semiotic operations of the new work, whether it be parodic or reverent.[1] Without the aural equivalent of quotation marks to call attention to a sound's status as sample, listeners who may have never heard the 'original' may not recognise that they are listening to a borrowed sound. The extent of digital transformation performed on a sample, such as filtering, reversal, EQ, and so on, also has a hand in obscuring its history. As such, any theoretical model of how semiosis occurs in sampling practice has to acknowledge the innate dynamism of the musical object, a thing untethered to any particular point in space and time, as well as the irrelevance of the conventional conception of the origin in demarcating the bounds of creativity.

While the origin can no longer predetermine the valency of the original or creative gesture in sampling practice, it is not entirely obsolete. In fact, the origin plays a unique role in the aesthetics and ethics of sampling practice, and is never simply ignored in the process of creation. Producers have a surprising reverence for the historicity of their source material, which might seem ironic in light of how the sample may seem to be stripped of its historic, semantic, and musical associations along with its context. However, the historicity of the source operates in counterpoint with the ahistorical intentions of the practice, as producers deliberately work against the aura of the original. This aura describes not merely the past, but its internal structure and logic. Within the new song, the sample is the space of simultaneous play and rupture, where the past both defines the present and is effaced by it. Sampling celebrates the possibility of freeplay, where the sample is never necessarily encoded with its aura, and is instead an infinitely flexible signifier. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest in the opening epigram to this essay, musical form, and sampling in particular, resists the absolutism of linear signification. The polysemic capacity of the sample reinstates a kind of agency

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and a different mode of authenticity, those particularly fretted terms in the era of sound recording.

II

Creativity in sampling practice runs parallel to this revised notion of agency, attenuated to the elasticity of the sample. In *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, Joseph Schloss (2004) sets out an aesthetic and ethical taxonomy of sampling practice, based on ten years of fieldwork among hip-hop producers. His work focuses primarily on producers, defined as deejays who use studio methodologies including digital sampling, over deejays who create music using turntables only in live performance. In his ethnographic study, several traditionally informed values emerge as fundamental to the unwritten rules that govern sampling practice. Schloss suggests that fidelity to these tenets helps determine whether the producer is considered particularly artful in his/her use of sampled music. He also argues that while some of these rules are determined largely by tradition, they belie the complex aesthetic perspective underscoring general sampling practice. They also clarify the meaning of originality and creativity in a productive mode which is inherently founded in a process of reproduction. For producers, originality has to do with a certain effacement of the origin, as Schloss writes:

> For hip-hop producers – who *are* highly attuned to the origins of particular samples – the significance tends to lie more in the ingenuity of the way the elements are fused together than in calling attention to the diversity of their origins. In other words, to say that hip-hop is about fragmentation because it is composed of samples is akin to saying that a brick wall is about fragmentation because it is composed of individual bricks. (Schloss 2004, p. 66)

The song constructed from samples is not a pastiche of empty histories, as sample-based music asserts its own continuity. Sampling's aesthetic project is one of recombination and recontextualisation, and the notion of creativity must be parsed through the parameters of this project. The conception of creativity as the construction of diverse, unexpected relationships is a reminder of the distinct conceptions of sound-as-object in instrument-based and sample-based music. Sample-based music uses sounds instrumentally, rather than using instruments to make sounds. In sampling, sound marks the beginning of the creative process, and is accordingly treated as raw material. Instrument-based music treats sound as an ontological object, in which sound is considered the end of the process.

The creative process in sample-based music can be traced within two spaces, equally constituted by both the search for source material and the act of composition. The initial search for samples demands the exertion of a certain kind of effort, which becomes an aesthetic requirement in and of itself, as Schloss describes:

> The process of acquiring rare, usually out-of-print, vinyl records for sampling purposes has become a highly developed skill and is referred to by the term 'digging in the crates' ('digging' for short). Evoking images of a devoted collector spending hours sorting through milk crates full of records in used record stores, garages, and thrift shops, the term carries with it a sense of valor and symbolizes an unending quest for the next record. (*ibid*., p. 79)

Original vinyl is customarily valued over compilations or compact discs, largely due to its connection with the practice of 'digging in the crates'. Schloss also argues that vinyl's special status is intrinsically bound up in sampling ethics and aesthetics. As

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such, the somewhat strict usage of vinyl records over compact discs or compilations situates the producer as someone embedded within the hip-hop tradition of sampling.

However, while the position of the record in sampling's aesthetic structure speaks to the priority of tradition in the culture of sampling, its privilege also has to do with the record *qua* object. Producers often prefer the ineffable quality of the sound that comes off a record, which is bound up in the ontological status of the record. In 'Defining phonography: an experiment in theory', Eric Rothenbuhler and John Peters theorise the ontological difference between compact discs and records. They argue that the fundamental distinction between them has to with history and embodiment, since the record is an object that promises a corporeal fidelity to a moment in history. Where fidelity in a compact disc is determined by the Sony–Phillips convention, the grooves in a record were physically inscribed by the vibrations of the music, and thus, was 'encoded … not by convention but by nature' (Rothenbuler and Peters 1997, p. 254). The record, then, is more of a historical object than the compact disc could ever be:

> In the terms of Benjamin, the CD technocrats live in 'homogeneous and empty time', in which one event relentlessly succeeds the next, while the audiophiles live in 'revolutionary time', in which it is possible to make immediate links between the now and the then, in which a historical moment can surge into the present. (*ibid*., p. 254)

For Rothenbuler and Peters, the playing of a record is an embodied enactment of history: 'Phonography traces events not only in its method of recording, but in the life of the record as well. As phonograph records age they pick up dirt, scratches, and wear from use and handling. When an old phonograph record is played, the sound of its age, the tale of its physical history, is reproduced' (*ibid*., p. 259). The scratched compact disc, of course, simply fails to function. In this comparative framework, the record is as closely tied to a historical moment as a musical object can be in the age of sound recording. While Rothenbuler and Peters are examining the fetishist's preference for records over compact discs at an ontological level, and use the term 'experiment' in their title as a caveat against the claim of truth, their analysis reinforces the stature of the record as a historical object, from which emanates the glow of the aura. The musical object's aura is thus inscribed with a certain historic structure. The record-as-historical-fetish seems to stem not from the notion of the record as being part of a specific spacetime, but as capturing a cultural zeitgeist: 'But it is not so much the history of a community or even of a musical form that producers are interested in, but the history of sound recordings' (Schloss 2004, p. 157). Producers' intense awareness of the origins of their music may then necessitate the record's elevated status as a source. The status accorded to the record suggests that the practice does not simply ignore the origin of the sample. Rather, producers are cognisant of the sample's historicity, so they may consciously reproduce a sound without reiterating its aura.

The search for source material demands the effort of 'digging in the crates' largely because the act of composition is constituted not only by a producer's facility at recombination and recontextualisation, but by his/her ability as a listener. The successful pursuit of new samples has, as its limit, the producer's capacity to hear musical possibility in a song, to listen for connections that may not currently exist in the song, to perceive aural spaces where they might not be obvious. This requires conceiving of sound as plastic material, and not as a finished product. In his essay 'Signs of imagination, identity, and experience: a Peircian semiotic theory for music', Thomas Turino writes:

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> Any musical unit is comprised of a number of components including: pitch, scale type, timbre, rhythmic motion, tempo, melodic shape, meter, dynamics, harmony (where applicable), specific melodies, quotes, genres – all sounding simultaneously. Any of these parameters can and often do function as discrete icons, rhemes and dicent signs which may be meaningfully combined to produce a macrolevel sign, although the significance of certain components may be foregrounded in the musical context. *This multi-componential aspect of music cannot be overemphasized as a basis of music's affective and semiotic potential*. (Turino 1999, pp. 236–7, emphasis Turino's)

The combination of a multiplicity of varied elements is, for Turino, the essential means to creating networks of signification in music. In Peircian semiotics, no essential link exists between a sign and its meaning, a sound and its signified, or its reception. The initial deconstruction, or listening, of a song is a pulling apart of semiotic threads, a hearing past the macro-level sign to retrieve the discrete icons, rhemes and dicent signs that compose it. This act of semiotic deconstruction is inherent in the process of (re)construction, as Harry Allen notes in *The Village Voice Electromag*: 'Like the particle physicists who break open atoms, hoping to later dig out their most elementary particles, dope DJs break open breaks, searching for the answer to hip-hop's most basic, yet unanswered question: how small is a piece of funk?' (Allen 1988, p. 11).

In Turino's framework, a musical sign has no set meaning since it is an index and not a symbol, and is thus particularly vulnerable to contextual change:

> … the meaning attached to indices are not fixed. Unlike the meanings of symbols, which can be confirmed by consulting a dictionary or math book, indices are fluid, multileveled, and highly context-dependent. The effects of indices can be *guided* by controlling the contexts of reception but they cannot be guaranteed. (Turino 1999, p. 236)

Turino uses Jimi Hendrix's performance of 'The Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock as an example of creative indexing, which 'involves the juxtaposition of two or more indices in novel ways that play off of the original meanings of the signs. Another example would be the wearing of a tuxedo (indexing formality) with red tennis sneakers (informality)' (*ibid*., p. 242). According to Turino, Hendrix's combination of the American national anthem (indexing nationalism) with his use of 'the loud electric guitar with feedback and distortion' (indexing rock counter-culture of the late 1960s) and his quotation of 'Taps' (indexing military funerals) produced the macro-level sign of a war protest song, reversing the original jingoistic meaning of the anthem (*ibid*., p. 242). In Turino's analysis, Hendrix's criticism exercises the plasticity of the musical sign and reveals the stakes within a song's aura. Through its location within a larger musical piece, a sign is encoded with a kind of external logic, its meaning determined by its context. The musical sign is a cipher, its aura generated through the intersection of historical, musical and generic elements. However, these meanings are not intrinsic to a sign or sample, which can be manipulated to produce a multiplicity of meanings, even contradictory ones.

The practice of sampling is built upon the elasticity of the micro-level musical sign. However, sampling cannot always be marked as a breed of creative indexing since the practice often pivots on the elision of the sample's origin or, at the very least, the deflection of its aura. By demarcating certain aesthetic choices and behaviours within the realm of creativity, the unwritten rules among producers and DJs tend to preclude the transmission of the sample's aura along with its musical elements.[2] Schloss delineates several other interrelated rules that have, at their heart, an interest in the specific paradigm of creativity prized in the sampler's aesthetic.

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One of these is the 'no biting' rule, which places a restriction on source material that has been recently used by someone else. Biting 'refers pejoratively to the appropriation of intellectual material from other hip-hop artists. Generally speaking, it *does not* apply to the appropriation of intellectual material from outside the hip-hop community' (Schloss 2004, p. 105). Intellectual property, as defined within this framework, does not describe an object so much as a process or creative act. A producer may only sample recently used material if he attempts a different approach to the sample than his forebears.

Schloss's other rules are rooted in this conception of creativity and intellectual property, most tellingly in the rule that bars a producer from sampling more than one part of a given record. Sampling more than one fragment or musical sign in an existing song would be tantamount to aesthetic laziness, since the elements already cohere. In order to act creatively, a producer must efface the sonic elements that surround a sample, which would help to constitute aura and genre, and posit radical new relationships between different samples. Schloss insists on an intimate connection between ethics and creativity in sampling practice: 'The association of ethical righteousness with creativity is manifested in this rule. Essentially, the rule argues that it is not creative to combine things that already go together' (*ibid*., p. 130). In accord with Turino's semiotic account, sampling takes signs out of their original contexts and recombines them to produce a macro-level sign. In the context of a new song, these signs connect with each other in multiplying directions, opening the polysemic horizon of the sample, and refuting its earlier indexical associations.

The project of 'creative' and 'original' sampling is then the intentional stifling of the sample's aura or, at the very least, its prior logic. This strategy requires the spatio-temporal reduction of the original song into reproducible sonic parts with semiotic flexibility. This would also be a means of resuscitating Schafer's panicky term 'schizophonia', since active, creative sampling practice may be read as the seizing of control over the errant 'synthetic soundscape' (Schaefer 1977, p. 91).

III

The tyranny of the origin in the cultural imagination has been attended by a rhetoric of deep loss. Sound recording ostensibly arrives at the sacrifice of agency, the practice of sampling accordingly enacting some kind of hopeless reiteration and mere rearrangement. Yet, as Schloss' ethnography demonstrates, originality in sampling practice has very little to do with the anachronistic conception of the origin as the indisputable centre of meaning. The abdication of the origin in a theory of sampling practice echoes Jacques Derrida's work on the failure of presence as the governing principle of writing and representation. As Derrida relocates meaning from the source to the freeplay of signifiers, he creates the space for a redefined kind of agency that may also map onto sampling practice.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida addresses the persistence of the origin through the history of Western philosophy, exposing the futility of maintaining it as final semantic benchmark. He deconstructs the supposed priority of speech over writing as being more proximate to truth, positing that this phonocentrism is rooted in Western philosophy's logocentrism, which prizes universal logic and reason as its goal. Derrida reveals 'the metaphysics of presence' to be at the heart of logocentrism,

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the fiercely held hope that there exists a 'transcendental signified' that eclipses all signs and mediations (Derrida 1997, p. 49). For Derrida, the teleological desire for presence motivates the logic of logocentrism, as it fuels Schafer's fear of schizophonia, and the charge of inauthenticity oft levelled at producers. In dissolving the ideal of presence, Derrida erases the hope of absolute origin from the semantic equation entirely, a move which has incited accusations of philosophical nihilism.

Indeed, the problem of supposed meaninglessness makes Derrida's semantic framework uniquely prescient of semiosis in sampling practice. The dispersal of origin undertaken in *Of Grammatology* facilitates an understanding of the flexibility of the sign, and its continued generation and entropy through time. As the sample is transfigured by recontextualisation, signification emerges from a dialectic between that which is absent and that which is present, where that which is is fundamentally constituted by that which was, even as that which was is made to disappear. In this way, the sample signifies by way of its trajectory through time, from prior context to new song. The defeat of the origin as the measure of authenticity realises freeplay as the internal cog of signification, revising the origin as the trace of a trace of a trace, *ad infinitum*.

While signification in sampling practice emerges from the intersection of past and present, the aura of the sample's source does not predetermine its meaning, or even its semiotic register. The elasticity of the musical sign, as Turino notes, allows the same sample to register in radically different ways, depending on how the sample interacts with other musical signs in the song. The breed of semiotic change effected by sampling becomes apparent when mapping the sample from its source to its new context. This change can be figured through genre or style, through history, through conventional meaning, or even ontologically.

Both DJ Spooky (1996) and DJ Shadow (1998) sample the opening drum break from Skull Snaps' 'It's a New Day', (1974) and while both maintain the sampled break as the centre of their songs, the sample takes on a generically different character in each. In this case, sampling reveals genre to be constituted by some fairly liquid categories. This transformation of genre necessarily provokes a corresponding shift in cultural context, as the sample comes to signify within a different framework. The musical trajectory of a sample is one of deflection, in that the original expectation of the sample is frustrated, and absorption, as the sample is found a logical place within the structure of the new song. In this particular example, DJ Spooky and DJ Shadow elide the sample's aura and history while retaining its musical shape.

Skull Snaps released their self-titled funk record in 1974, at a cultural moment when funk was becoming consolidated as a genre involving rhythmic, social and political elements. Though a few promotional singles were released, the band fell into obscurity, and their first LP proved to be their last. It has achieved cult status as a rare funk vinyl record, and until its re-release on CD in 1996, was prized for its obscurity. It became a collector's item, selling for hundreds of dollars on the private market. This scarcity may have contributed to its appearance on many hip-hop songs, given the aesthetic protocol of 'digging in the crates' and the prominent position of rare vinyl in the sampler's instrumental array. 'It's a New Day' embodies the elements associated with funk, both musically and politically, mirroring funk's coincidence with the Black Power movement. Indeed, the 'new day' heralded in the song refers to a day when 'we ain't gonna step to the back of the bus'. Like other funk recordings, such as James Brown's *Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud* (1968)

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and George Clinton's cosmological narrative of African-American freedom, *Mothership Connection* (1975), 'It's a New Day' takes a political stance while adhering to funk's aesthetic of complex rhythmic patterns and a vocal style informed by soul music. The drum break from 'It's a New Day' has been widely sampled because drum breaks, unlike other parts of a record, are both easy to isolate and particularly vulnerable to digital transformation. The drum break stands alone for the two opening bars of 'It's a New Day' before the entrance of the funk guitar and the buoyant 'Hey! It's a New Day!' that moves in rhythmic concord with the other musical lines in the song. Guitar, trumpet and maracas temper the drum break, producing interlocking rhythms. 'It's a New Day' maintains a continuous musical line from beginning to end, instruments all fusing in a fairly holistic musical conception.

DJ Spooky samples this drum break in 'Anansi Abstrakt', from his 1996 album *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*. DJ Shadow uses the sample in 'What Does Your Soul Look Like (Part 3)', from his 1997 album *Preemptive Strike*. 'Anansi Abstrakt' is ostensibly located within the genre sometimes known as illbient music, which shares features with ambient music, but aims to produce an eerie atmosphere through the use of dissonant sounds. However, 'Anansi Abstrakt' is also recognised both for its dub influences and its electronic character. DJ Shadow's interest in hip-hop aesthetics has largely been one of form, his sampling practice deliberately effacing generic categories, though he is known chiefly for his experimental instrumental hip-hop style. Both songs defy the sample's generic trajectory from the very outset, as the drum break does not begin either song. Rather, both open with building sonic textures, deferring the arrival of an identifiable beat until nearly two minutes have passed.

'Anansi Abstrakt' opens with multiplying vocals on reverb that quickly fade, underscored by the crackling sound of a record, a gesture towards the sample's source. One minute and twenty-three seconds in, a dissonant horn surges in and out of audibility, offering the first percussive signal in the song. A beat built by throbbing sucking sounds presages the arrival of the sampled break. However, when it finally emerges, nearly two minutes into the song, the sampled drum break is hollow, echoing within itself, upsetting the timbre of the original. In 'It's a New Day', the drum break interlocks with other instrumental rhythms, creating a complex rhythmic interplay. 'Anansi Abstrakt' utilises the shape of the break such that the original sonic quality of the sample becomes almost inaudible. Through the passage of the song, the drum break becomes fuzzier and begins to slow down, transmuting into an entirely different sound. The leisurely pace of the break seems to ground the song in the genre of electronic dub or illbient music, despite its essential role in marking 'It's A New Day' as a funk tune. In this way, a drum break which operates as the generic core of a song becomes the foundation for a different genre. By the end of 'Anansi Abstrakt', the rhythmic shape of the drum break remains, though the original sample has been entirely retextured. Finally, the entire sample disappears, its trace remaining through the remnants of its shape, the break seeming as if it were produced by different instruments entirely.

DJ Shadow effects a similar breed of transformation in 'What Does Your Soul Look Like (Part 3)' As in 'Anansi Abstrakt', building sonic textures open the song, as near indecipherable chatter underscored by deep rumbling gives way to soft wind chimes and a floating flute melody which remains in the background for the duration of the song. The emergence of the beat is suspended until one minute and

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fifty seconds, when the sample comes in suddenly, the drums of the original now much heavier and more resonant. The sampled beat is hefty and unremitting, transmuted into, loosely defined, a hip-hop beat. While the drum break in 'It's a New Day' is modulated by funky guitar and upbeat vocals, interlocking with the other rhythmic patterns in the song, it becomes opaque both as a sample and as an organising principle in DJ Shadow's revision. Though the drum break is the heaviest element in 'What Does Your Soul Look Like (Part 3)', and repeats, unchanged, for most of the song, DJ Shadow contributes multiple elements of sonic play that hang over the relentless beat. A repetitive piano works in concert with the sampled break, mimicking its shape even as it offers a markedly different tonal element. Dissonant flute blasts and the unmistakable sounds of a scratching record appear, apparently improvised over the recurring beat, such that the break becomes something obvious, made transparent through recurrence. At three minutes and forty-eight seconds, the break abruptly cuts out and remains in suspension for nearly twenty seconds while the wind chimes and flute melody continue, unaffected by the absence or presence of the drum break. At this moment, the break is revealed as something that propels the song's forward thrust in opposition to the song's more organic sounds.

On both songs, the sample is transmuted into something that resembles its first instrumental incarnation, but differs from it at a sonic level. In its new context, the sampled drum break comes to a point of near-erasure, leaving its musical trace in the new composition. Here, the sample is revealed as an object of play, audible only through its trace in its new context. For Derrida, play and trace are the conceptual upshots of the loss of the centre, or origin, the modes of signifying in the metaphysical remnants left after sound recording. While play invokes a sense of playfulness, it also suggests signification to be a game without absolutes, where no meaning trumps any other. Play also refers to something like an articulated joint, which is attached to something but in such a way that it has a freedom of movement and is thus flexible and open to manipulation. The sample is inherently jointed, flexible in its capacity to signify multiple genres, based on its fluid connection to its old context. This conception of play gives new meaning to the act of playing records. In 'Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences', Derrida writes:

> Freeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically conceived, freeplay must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence, beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around. (Derrida 1978, p. 278)

Absence and presence are contiguous in the sample, the original remaining through its trace. The trace is the site of rupture and play between new and old context, new and old signified. The trace is that constituted in the sign, or sample, by virtue of the fact that the sign is nothing but itself: if a sign means, it means by difference, and what it differs from becomes an inevitable, absent part of its presence. For Derrida, the trace designates the play or oscillation between a present, a thing-as-it-is, and an absence, an other. The trace is the 'arche-phenomenon of "memory"', the play between past and present, the residue of the past that allows the present consciousness, enacted by the new song, to exist: 'The trace related no less to what is called the future than what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by the very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not;

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that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present' (Derrida 1997, p. 70; 1982, p. 394). The conception of sampling as being a practice of tracing is embodied in both DJ Spooky and DJ Shadow's choice of professional names, as if they viewed their art as a ghosting process. DJ Spooky, in particular, conceives of his DJ persona as a separate construct, an inhabited personality that perpetuates this act of ghosting.

The spectre of the sample haunts its semiosis in its new location, the present tracing the past even as a fissure splits it from that past. The resituation of the sample in its new context is a moment of rupture and play. Where play demarcates the space of jointedness or articulation, rupture describes the moment of severance between past ('It's a New Day') and present ('Anansi Abstrakt' and 'What Does Your Soul Look Like (Part 3)'). In DJ Shadow and DJ Spooky's revisions, the historical and political associations of the drum break from 'It's a New Day' have little apparent resonance. The veneer of history, rather than history itself, is conveyed in both songs through reference to the record as object, alluded to in 'Anansi Abstrakt' by the overlay of crackling sound, and in DJ Shadow's piece by the sound of scratching. Neither DJ Spooky nor DJ Shadow cite Skull Snaps in their liner notes, though DJ Spooky sees fit to cite an obvious sample from a different track, as if he considered the drum break altered to the degree that it is no longer a sample. In its new contexts, and altered by digital transformation, the sample comes to a point of rupture from its history, where it is no longer a sample.[3]

Although the sample is not a historical object (unless deployed for the purposes of parody or political gesture), the record from which the sample comes certainly is. As Schloss notes, producers assert an essential difference between playing a record from its original album and from a reissue. He also writes:

> Although the genre, artist, and original social context of a sample are important, hip-hop producers are much more concerned with the label the song was released on, other songs that appeared on the same album, the album's cover, and the associations that it carries within the producer's community. (Schloss 2004, p. 157)

The distinction between original and reissue brings to light two apparently paradoxical impulses inherent in sampling practice. In addition to the obscurity of the original record, producers cherish the 'raw' recording quality of the original. The appreciative attention paid to the low fidelity character of the original seems to operate in conflict with the advanced digital technology used to manipulate it. However, this apparent dichotomy affirms the ahistorical ambitions of the producer's project. In *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*, Paul Théberge (1997) examines the evolving relationships between technology, consumption and musical production. His discussion of an aesthetic of 'sound' reveals another dimension to a record's historically inscribed aura. According to Théberge, 'sound' in the age of sound recording takes on an indefinable identity, separate from style or structure:

> Indeed, musicians today (as well as critics and audiences) often speak of having a unique and personal 'sound' in the same manner in which another generation of musicians might have spoken of having developed a particular 'style' of playing or composing. The term 'sound' has taken on a peculiar material characteristic that cannot be separated either from the 'music' or, more importantly, from the sound recording as the dominant medium of reproduction. With regards to the latter, the idea of a 'sound' appears to be a particularly contemporary concept that could hardly have been maintained in an era that did not possess mechanical or electronic means of reproduction. (Théberge 1997, p. 191)

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A 'sound' is 'an identifying feature by which musicians, record companies, critics, and listeners categorise the music they make, promote, and listen to', a notion which has generated its own logic and vocabulary (*ibid*., p. 193). The aesthetic of 'sound' further inflects the value accorded to the original record in the producer's array. Not only does the original record *qua* object bear historical weight, the rawness of its 'sound' is an integral component of its aura. The 'sound' that comes off an original record echoes 'the tale of its physical history' (Rothenbuler and Peters 1997, p. 259). The producer's preference for this 'sound' thus speaks to a kind of historical fidelity. Since producers have such an interest in the historical position of the source, all cited samples are located in the cultural, social and musical milieus from whence they came. This rhetorical move mirrors the semiotic trajectory of the sample, and my intention is to both respect and, in some measure, reproduce the producer's aesthetic. In these examples, these histories are in fact made absent through the process of sampling. Like the trace, a sample signifies through its disparity from its previous semiotic incarnation. Its shape is preserved, but its difference, which is absent, is also present.

Rupture in sampling practice is also ontological in nature, exerting even more pressure on the schism between sound and its source. This is obvious in particularly experimental types of sampling, such as that practised by The Avalanches. In 2001, The Avalanches released their album *Since I Left You*, on which they mix over 900 samples to (re)construct songs wholecloth from the array of sonic fragments. Some samples are identifiable (and cited in the liner notes, albeit in remarkably small print), although most are not. Throughout the album, The Avalanches use samples as raw material, pure sound, to a much greater degree than most producers. Where the drum break from 'It's a New Day' remained, for the most part, a drum break, serving the need for a beat, samples in the Avalanches' hands are often ontologically transfigured. Their use of samples gestures towards the materiality of sampling practice, and most of the samples are not merely placed in counterpoint with a newly composed musical structure, but with other samples, and sometimes their repeated selves, as context. In the Avalanches' mode of sampling, the sample is not a historical or semantic object. The degree of transformation and reconfiguration performed on the sample erases the musical, cultural and social history of the original, even as its trace remains.

In their song 'Flight Tonight', the Avalanches construct a song using two major samples. 'Wicked She Wicked' was originally performed by Billy Boyo, and released on the two artist 'clash' album with Little Harry, *D.J. Clash Vol. 2*. A singjay styled deejay, Billy Boyo had a short-lived career, recording from 1982 to 1984 before falling into obscurity. Singjaying is a Jamaican style of reggae which combines toasting, repetitive improvisatory chants emerging from oral tradition and developing through the 1960s, and singing in scat format. One of its most distinct generic features is the singjay's textured vocal improvisatory embellishments. The album on which 'Wicked She Wicked' appears was, for a period of time, quite rare and only available on vinyl. While the London-based record company Silver Kamel is now re-releasing some of his work, the Avalanches sampled 'Wicked She Wicked' before its re-release.

'Flight Tonight' also samples a recurring vocal fragment from 'More Than U Know', by Prince Paul and De La Soul. 'More Than U Know' appeared on *A Prince Among Thieves*, Prince Paul's second album. A producer whose work is sometimes described as alternative hip-hop, Prince Paul is also informed by sampling practice.

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This concept album has a continuous narrative storyline that takes as its subject the cultural issues and stereotypes rampant in hip-hop culture, purporting an ostensible criticism of the culture from within the genre. The album aims, through the deployment of stock gangsta-rap characters, to make transparent the fictional nature of hip-hop's clichéd personas. Although The Avalanches' choice of 'Wicked She Wicked' speaks to their participation in the ethical precept of sampling from obscure vinyl, 'More Than U Know' was never rare, released on both vinyl and compact disc. The Avalanches also use a sample from Madonna's 'Holiday' on two songs, so their concern for fulfilling the traditional aesthetic requirements of sampling practice may be less stringent, or it may speak to their positions as Australian, and not American, hip-hop artists. More likely, the ethics of sampling practice are themselves somewhat liquidly defined, prizing the samplers' brand of creativity, however nebulously defined, over strict rules which may limit creative possibility.

'Flight Tonight' opens with several drum breaks layered over sharp piercing electronic blips, all of which conspire to set a rather fast tempo. Eight seconds into the song, the refrain 'Wicked She Wicked' ('she wicked she wicked she wicked') is repeated four times. However, the vocal has been sped up and transposed into a higher pitch than the original. As a result, it is nearly unrecognisable, both as a sample and as a human voice. It comes to a point of frenzy, running counter to the relaxed reggae-determined logic and tempo of the original. Though the sample is stripped of its reggae beat, it maintains the cadence of the original chorus, the words retaining their temporal ratios to each other. The Avalanches do not sample any other part of Billy Boyo's song, choosing instead to repeat the mutated vocal line as musical punctuation. As such, the sample becomes a vehicle of percussion rather than voice. The Avalanches effect a similar transformation of state on the sample from 'More Than U Know'. They extract one line from the original song, 'And I need to book a flight tonight, ah …', and loop it, such that the line flanks itself on either side. It becomes, in effect, a percussive force in the song, where in its previous location, the lyric was part of a continuous narrative.

As both these samples are figured as objects of play, the symbolic capacity of the word is averted, linguistic syntax giving way to musical grammar. Through their recontextualisation in 'Flight Tonight', as well as the abrupt deflection of lyrical expectation, these samples are emptied of semantic content and forced to do a radically different kind of work. Here, looping of vocal lines does not create a semantic trap. Where the mere repetition of words would be akin to a kind of entrapment or closing of semantic possibility, the looping of verbal lines is a process of opening. When vocal lines are reconceived and repositioned as percussive lines, a sample is transfigured at an ontological level. The continuous repetition of the voice reinforces the sample's status as plastic material, engaging an ontological shift in the status of sound. While the mere proximity of the original samples would have produced cacophony, given the marked difference between them, the electronic beat underlying the entire song modifies both samples and diffuses their opposition. Though the trace of the original sample operates in a similar fashion as it does in the transition of the sample from 'It's A New Day' to its new contexts, in that the musical shape of the sample remains, the trace here is also ontological. Here, the grain of the voice is present, as it cannot be totally erased, but it has become something else entirely.[4] The stakes of rupture are significantly raised in this type of sampling, as, like Derrida's articulated joint, the voice is ostensibly attached to a something, be it the body or the record, but it has been pressed to signify not only something else, but somehow else.

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The sample is not necessarily a historical object; however, since it is an object of play, it can certainly operate as one to fulfil the demands of creative indexing. The type of play here can be musical or ontological, but more often than not, is semantic. As the sample signifies through its trace, that trace can be historically, as well as aesthetically, constituted. In Hendrix's performance of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock, he subverts the semiotic system of the anthem. In his reworking, the referent of the cited song, the nation, is present, even as its internal nationalistic structure is made absent. The impact of context on the song causes it to reach a point of semantic rupture, which gives it political and parodic charge. In this way, he turns the anthem's aura against itself, even while maintaining the song's historic status. While Hendrix staged his protest through live music, creative indexing in sampling practice operates in a similar fashion. While aura is grounded in history, it does not determine its meaning. Moreover, reception is the major problem with this kind of aural parody, since the meaning of a politicised musical gesture has, as its bounds, the recognisability of the cited song. The obviousness of a musical citation cannot be guaranteed outside an intended audience, which is one of the most salient reasons why Hendrix chose the national anthem, the soundtrack of the national consciousness, as the referent for his protest. And yet, though his gesture is political, it does not preclude aesthetic virtuosity. Making a beat is still plausible even if a historical reference goes unnoticed.

IV

In their opening essay to *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 'Introduction: Rhizome', Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari oppose the model of the rhizome to the model of the tree as a mode of conceiving dynamic processes of signification. The paradigm of the tree is a stratified semantic map that takes root at origin, the beginning point from which all meanings spring. The rhizome does away with the very notion of origin:

> Let us summarize the principal characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple … Unlike the graphic arts, drawing, or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 21)

Like the rhizome, the sample resists arborification, a multiplicity of meanings always available to the elastic musical sign. Sampling occasions the arousal of polysemy over the singular theological meaning, which does not enact of the death of the author, or the musician, or even the past, simply because it has nothing to do with death. In sampling practice, signification collects 'around a parish, a bishopric, a capital. It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil' (*ibid*., p. 7). As the origin fades from hearing, the hierarchy that springs from it is also destabilised.

Rather than clinging to the myth of the composer savant, sampling maintains an ethics of inclusion that is social as well as musical, creating a tradition that involves the past without submitting to its structures and limitations. Its somewhat anachronistic temporal position can be described in terms of the opposition between memory and history, as Pierre Nora writes:

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> Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. [...] Memory is blind to all but the group it binds – which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority. (Nora 1989, pp. 8–9)

The antagonism between history and memory here marks history as an ossifying process, a failed iteration and reiteration of the past. Sampling may well serve as a live act of memory, a means of cultural participation in an increasingly stratified and technocratic world. And yet, in Nora's view, modern memory has already become a type of history, partly since

> [m]odern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. What began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording. The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs – hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past. (*ibid*., p. 13)

As a practice, sampling subverts the logic of archival memory. Even as the existence of sound recording calls the origin into question, cultural impulse attempts to use that technology as a historical preservative. Producers recognise that histories are constituted by various interpretations of the past, and that the archive is a creative medium rather than the static imprint of that past. The sample shares the same temporal structure as the rhizome, defying the petrifying impulse of history. As an agent of memory, the hip-hop producer 'know[s] how to move between things, establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 25).

Each producer, then, is always negotiating a multiplicity of relationships to the past, even while inhabiting the present. Sampling embodies nostalgia without return, freeplay operating as the fulcrum between then and now. Agency in sampling is bound to the notion of freeplay, remodelled in the image of the rhizome over the arbor, relocated to the connections between sounds rather than the source. Disparate source material can always be made coherent, no matter if that disparity is measured musically, generically or socially. Sampling practice reveals these distinctions, supposedly branded at origin, to be volatile and amorphous, quick to dissolve. The most idealistic accounts of sampling envision the practice as cultural metaphor, musical space doubling as social space. If this is true, then the producer spins a tale of the patchwork self, for whom technology no longer produces fracture and schizophrenia, but a uniquely fluid integrity. At the same time, this utopian impulse must be tempered by cultural and social practices if sampling is to serve as anything more than metaphor.

Endnotes

1 Duchamp's use of found objects, like Warhol's, demands the recognition of the cited image by its audience in order to achieve its aesthetic goal. Burrough's cut-ups, while serving different aesthetic ends, still adheres to the logic of the prior text.

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2 Of course, this is omitting deliberate parody, such as John Oswald's *Plunderphonics* (originally distributed for free in 1988 before being suppressed, and subsequently re-released by Seeland Records in 2001) and Negativland's parody of U2 (1991). However, in these cases, the aura of the sample is turned against itself, and does not emerge unscathed in its new context. Creating parody or mounting criticism through sampling would fulfil Turino's notion of creative indexing, but adheres to a different aesthetic project than 'making beats'.

3 Legal precedents require samplers to cite their sources; however, many seem to adhere to DJ Spooky's notion that the sample, once altered beyond sameness, need not be explicitly referenced.

4 I'm invoking the conception of the grain as espoused by Roland Barthes in his essay 'The grain of the voice', wherein he writes: 'The "grain" is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs' (Barthes 1977b, p. 88).

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