

APROPRIATION AND INAPPROPRIATE TRADITION IN THE PRACTICES OF SAMPLING AT RAP MUSIC IN THE CITY OF BELO HORIZONTE

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ABSTRACT

Appropriation is a recurrent element in the context of Hip Hop. It can be enacted in a number of ways, but the tradition of sound sampling is a very significant creative resource driving music in the Hip-Hop culture. The use of sampling started in the 1980's and helped to configure the traditional sonority of rap. It helped the consolidation of the Hip Hop culture and Rap as a world music genre, but also promoted the development of local styles of Rap. How the original action of borrowing music samples evolved in such a diversity of local cultures of Rap? How do local agents of the cultures of rap produce idiosyncrasies from the idea of sampling? In this study, we investigate musical practices and sampling carried out by beatmakers in Belo Horizonte, based on an ethnography among artists from the city of Belo Horizonte.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is the result of ethnography among rap music agents from the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The main purpose is to investigate the use of samples of other musical works in the musical production of rap beats. We are interested in knowing the opinion of the local artists about this technique, what symbolic constructions they inculcate in this procedure, in what ways this procedure (and the sonority that derives from it) inhabits the processes of beatmaking.

Born in the 1970s, in New York, in the Bronx region, Hip Hop is currently a global phenomenon. Over the last few decades, rap music, as well as break and graffiti, has spread through various locations, becoming a transnational artistic language. Although rap has many characteristics of Afro-American culture and musicality, the genre currently embraces a multitude of local characteristics. According to Toni Mitchell:

“Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world. Even as a universally recognized popular musical idiom, rap continues to provoke attention to local specificities. Rap and hiphop outside the

USA reveal the workings of popular music as a culture industry driven as much by local artists and their fans as by the demands of global capitalism and U.S. cultural domination”. [1]

This ethnography sought to observe the postures and creative options that comprise the use of samples in the beats creation process (or the option of not using them). During the research I talked to several producers, beatmakers, rappers and individuals from Belo Horizonte connected to rap music. I also participated in several events and visited studios, where I observed processes of musical production of raps. In addition Thus, I collaborate with the production of a radio show¹ specialized in rap, which provides me contact with artists and agents linked to the local rap music scene. Throughout the research I recorded notes, took pictures, and recorded nine interviews with rap agents, including eight music producers and one rapper.

The consultants who collaborated with this research are male, most of them over the age of 30, residents of Belo Horizonte and neighboring cities. Although the rappers were also able to collaborate with the discussion, I prioritized the contact with beatmakers and producers. This focus is due to the fact that they experience daily musical production, and provide a more immersed view on this issue. Another element that contributed to this choice is the fact that few researches about rap music use the beatmakers as interlocutors, or investigate aspects of the musical production of the genre. Rappers and the lyrical element of raps are often privileged as sources of information and analysis.

It was possible to observe that the sampling, besides being an aesthetic option that results in a type of sonority, also constitutes in one of the places of interaction of the artists of the region with the Hip Hop culture. Local producers' views and positions on sampling reveal the ways in which local actors deal with the history and the geographic shift of this culture and its musical genre. The value they attribute to Hip Hop demonstrates the desire to follow a tradition, even if it is imperative to adapt it for making it possible to be followed.

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¹ The radio show Hora RAP is produced by Clebin Quirino and the author. Since 2014, the program has been broadcasted live by Rádio UFMG Educativa, an FM radio station linked to the Federal University of Minas Gerais. www.ufmg.br/radio

2. RAP MUSIC AND ITS MUSICAL PRODUCTION

Rap is an outgrowth of the combination between DJs and MCs, and it evolved from the improvisation of the MCs, who used to perform over the beats played by the DJs in the Bronx block-parties. After 1979, with the commercial release of the first raps, what was a live performance also became a genre of popular music, a studio-produced musical record, to be sold and consumed by a large audience.

As it moved toward the recording studio, rap music faced a technical and creative challenge: how to record and produce the musical foundations under which rappers rhyme? During the parties, the MCs improvised during instrumental stretches of the songs selected by the DJs. These parts were known as breaks, and were chosen because they contained a strong rhythmic foundation [2] [3]. The DJs and dancers from the Bronx enjoyed the breaks because these were moments in which the harmonic and melodic elements stopped playing, so drums and percussion elements gained prominence. The DJs started to repeat the breaks in loop, through the use of two turntables with the same record. As soon as the break ended in one record, the DJ would start the same break in the other turntable, and so on, switching between the turntables. This technique created a repetitive cell and expanded the break for a long time. As in the Jamaican street parties in the 1960s [4], MCs began to improvise verses on the breaks, and this practice gave rise to rap music.

From the earliest recordings to the present, different techniques, tools and procedures were used to make the beats, which are the musical foundations that support rapper/MC performance. Originally, they preferred to record the performance of a band playing some grooves inspired by the breaks played by the DJs. Some time later, the electronic drums gained space as a tool in the beat-making process.

In the mid-1980s, rap music producers started to use keyboards and other hardware devices known as samplers. Samplers were devices that had the ability to digitally record, store, edit, and manipulate any sound. The excerpts recorded and digitally manipulated in these devices are called samples. The process of digitalization and manipulation of sounds for musical production came to be called sampling. Mark Kats defines sampling as:

“[...] a type of computer synthesis in which sound is rendered into data, data that in turn comprise instructions for reconstructing that sound. Sampling is typically regarded as a type of musical quotation, usually of one pop song by another, but it encompasses the digital incorporation of any prerecorded sound into a new recorded work”. [5] Initially, the samplers were designed as keyboards, in which it was possible to insert digital samples of sounds and to play them using the keys. The intention was to increase the timbral range available to the musicians and producers, without the necessity of a high investment on equipment or musicians. Later on, the samplers gained other designs, and came into existence with other shapes

and functions. What was initially thought to save time and money, meant a technical and procedural innovation in the context of popular music. Tricia Rose states that:

“Prior to rap music’s redefinition of the role samplers play in musical creativity, samplers were used almost exclusively as time- and moneysaving devices for producers, engineers, and composers. Samplers were used as short cuts; sometimes a horn section, a bass drum, or background vocals would be lifted from a recording easily and quickly, limiting the expense and effort to locate and compensate studio musicians. [...] In fact, prior to rap, the most desirable use of a sample was to mask the sample and its origin; to bury its identity. Rap producers have inverted this logic, using samples as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and privileged”. [6]

Rap musicians recognized in the samplers the opportunity to extend the logic of the Bronx DJs. The samplers enabled the producers to expand the foundation of the breaks. Nelson George expounds that:

Sampling’s flexibility gave hip hop-bred music makers the tools to create tracks that not only were in the hip hop tradition but allowed them to extend that tradition. For them the depth and complexity of sounds achievable on a creatively sampled record have made live instrumentation seem, at best, an adjunct to record making. Records were no longer recordings of instruments being played—they had become a collection of previously performed and found sounds. [7]

The transition from the stages to the studios also meant a change in the DJs’ activities. The advent of rap as a musical product brought the necessity of beatmaking. This is declared by Joseph Schloss:

“When hip-hop expanded to recorded contexts, both of these roles [MC and DJ] became somewhat more complex. MCs began to create increasingly involved narratives using complex rhythms and cadences. And although deejays continued to make music with turntables when performing live, most also developed other strategies for use in the studio, and these eventually came to include the use of digital sampling. As these studio methodologies gained popularity, the deejays who used them became known as producers”. [3]

Gradually, the DJs took over the beatmaking tasks, since conventional music producers did not have the aesthetic sensibility, neither the expertise needed for the job. At the beginning, nearly all beatmakers were DJs. Today this connection is not so strong anymore. Many beatmakers have never acted as DJs, and although a large number of DJs are dedicated to making beats, many of them are only committed to live performance.

Between the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, most of the rap beats were composed by the appropriation of sound elements from other musical works [8] [9]. The sample-based beatmaking became a sort of standard procedure, and coincided with a period of creative expansion and consolidation of the genre in the popular music market.

However, throughout the 1990s, the use of samples in rap’s musical production started to decline. One of the

reasons that contributed to this decline was the legal proceedings against rappers and producers, due to the use of phonograms and musical works belonging to third parties. The "Grand Upright Music, Ltda. Warner Bros. Records Inc., " case, which occurred in 1991, was a landmark with regard to legal interpretation of the use of samples of other works in musical creation. This is a lawsuit filed by singer-songwriter Gilbert O'Sullivan against rapper Biz Markie, who sampled an excerpt from O'Sullivan's song "Alone Again (Naturally)" on a track from the album "I Need a Haircut "(1991). After this case, it was determined that any use of musical samples should be pre-approved by the copyright holders of the original work. Such positioning interfered directly in the processes of rap music production, since it presented a considerable impediment to the viability of the records. Rights holders of sampled songs (usually record labels and copyright management offices) began to demand large amounts for samples clearance, which began to undermine the producers' borrowing enthusiasm. This is what Williams reports:

"Because of the tightening of copyright legislation for sampling in the late 1980s and early 1990s, collage-style albums like those from Public Enemy and De La Soul would be too expensive to make commercially in the mid-1990s and after". [10]

Thus, producers and rappers sought other ways to produce their music tracks, which contributed to the consolidation of other processes and tools that were already part of rap music, but which did not have as much evidence as sampling. "With the imposition of so many limitations, not to mention the fine line between creativity and a lawsuit, sample-based hip-hop artists have adapted their production approaches in many ways", states Amanda Sewell (2014. p. 300). This adaptation made room for an increase in the use of synthesizers and the return of the use of studio musicians. Anyhow, the obstacles imposed by copyright law cannot be considered the only reasons for reducing the use of samples in rap production. The socio-technical context - the genesis of tools and production equipment - and personal artistic choices are also significant factors for grasping the issue. Albeit sampling is not as decisive for rap's sonority today, it still operates as a timbral and procedural reference in different ways.

3. SAMPLING, PURISM AND BEATMAKING

Joseph Schloss [3] is responsible for a relevant research on musical production of raps based on the use of samples. Based on ethnography among American beatmakers that prioritize the use of samples in the production of beats, the author sought to understand the beatmakers on their own terms, focusing on the sampling process rather than on the final result (the beat, the music).

The author seeks to highlight the creative agency of musicians and producers, and states that the choice of using samples is not a pragmatic option, but aesthetic: [...] sampling, rather than being the result of musical deprivation, is an aesthetic choice coherent with the history and

values of the hip-hop community" (p. 21) [3]. Beatmakers do not sample because it is convenient, but because they consider it musically beautiful. In addition, he believes that the distinction between raps produced from samples and raps that do not use samples, rather than a technical distinction, is a distinction of genres (or sub-genres) within rap music.

Schloss identified a sort of purist behavior among the community of beatmakers surveyed, whose sampling role is central in this perspective. His research claims that beatmakers regard sample-based production as an evolution of hip hop DJ practice. In this sense, the ways of manipulating the samples and the aesthetic assumptions that guide their production processes are the same as the DJs did. The samplers allowed the possibilities envisioned by the DJs to expand and become more complex, and also made the work easier to execute. Another extreme of this purist behavior is the little (or no) importance attributed to the use of live instrumentation in beats production. According to Schloss, the use of such artifice does not sound authentic for the producers consulted during his research.

In an excerpt from the conversation I had with rapper and producer Easy CDA (Hertz Bento), he remembered a kind of purist behavior existing in rap music a few years ago. In this passage, he explained the importance of breaks for the construction of rap beats and, in a sort of historical link, he recalled a behavior similar to what Schloss explains:

"Because the break is born from this [funk] groove. And the rap music comes from the break... because the break was for dancing.. and later, for singing. And then it turns to a colossal thing. Today, the sky is the limit. Because today you can use anything to do it. Back in the days we had that stuff: "Hey, it ain't rap if it's not made in the MPC, if it's not sample-based".

M: "Where did they use to say that?"

E: "All over the world".

M: "Here in Brasil, too?"

E: "Everywhere, specially here". [11]

4. BEATMAKING AND SAMPLING IN BELO HORIZONTE

The city of Belo Horizonte has one of the most vibrant and diverse scenes of Brazilian rap. Alongside São Paulo, the city was the first in Brazil where the presence of b-boys and rappers could be noticed, in the mid-80s. Although the artists of Belo Horizonte do not have as much visibility and national circulation as the artists of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the local scene shows a constant, diversified and vibrant production. It is possible to suppose some explanations for the fact that the local artists do not reach so much repercussion, and they range from economic, social and historical questions. However, further research and further study is needed, and this is not our focus. In any case, there is an increasing number of local artists who overcome the difficulties and achieve national repercussion and acceptance. In the early days, it was the turn of the group União Rap Funk and MC Pelé.

More recently, artists like Flávio Renegado, Das Quebradas, DV Tribo, Gustavo Djonga, Clara Lima and Dulo de MC's, a bloc-party that includes all the Hip Hop elements as well as rap battles.

The first recordings of local rap groups took place in the early 1990s. The first beatmakers were DJs who spun records at the black-music parties, like DJ Joseph and DJ A Coisa. There was restricted access to equipment and recording studios so, until the end of this decade, few musical producers appeared in the local scene. At the beginning of the 2000s, there was an expansion of the producers' work. Despite the low purchasing power, this generation had access to basic computers and software, which enabled them to experience the beatmaking process more easily. DJ Spider, Easy CDA and Enecê are the first producers that emerged this time, followed later by Clebin Quirino, DJ Giffoni, among others. There was an even greater expansion of beatmaking activity in the last decade. The number of producers who started their activities recently is much higher than in the previous decade. This number grows regularly, due to full access to information, equipment and musical production resources. Currently, the beatmakers local scene is sufficiently structured, and offers rappers a rich variation of styles, sonorities, and technical resources.

The field research allows to affirm that the local beatmakers do not present a purely purist behavior (in the sense attributed by Schloss) in relation to the use of samples, but the use of samples is still very present in the beats production / composition processes. The study did not identify any beatmaker that produced solely based on the use of samples. No artist with whom I spoke to stated such a proposal, nor was it possible to determine a beatmaker with such a nature. On the other hand, the producers rarely say they don't use samples at all. To a greater or lesser extent, everyone makes use of this procedure, either due to aesthetic choices, an external demand (for instance, by the rapper), or inability/insecurity to deal with other music production tools.

There is a local tendency to merge different production and composition techniques and tools. It was possible to observe that sampling, both in the pragmatic and musical scopes, continues to be a reference for producers, but is coalesced with other production and composition resources, such as the use of virtual synthesizers and the recording of live performance on instruments such as guitar, electric bass and piano.

In addition, the data collected in the ethnographic process suggest that the use of samples is seen as a timbristic and symbolic link to the traditional sonority of hip-hop music. Several of the consultants made this connection explicit. Some producers, like DJ Giffoni (Sérgio Giffoni), relate the sampling to the essence of the genre: "I think that's part of rap music. This sampling stuff is part of rap" [12]. DJ A Coisa (Paulo da Silva Soares), one of the oldest DJs and local producers, has a similar opinion: "[...] sampling has everything to do with hip hop. Hip hop is shaped this way, you know? When you take something nobody remembers or, often, nobody knows, and you give it a new look" [13]. The MC and journalist PDR (Pedro Valentim) also develops a similar reasoning:

"I think [sampling] is a major principle, dude. I'm passionate about this sample stuff, indeed. I've been a beatmaker too, I've had my beatmaker season, I'm very much interested in the practice of making beats. I think it's foundational, like a lot of practices that come from the background of Hip Hop culture, that makes you... it makes you give new meanings to the things, from what you have in your hands, from the possibilities that are presented to you. And it's creating your history too". [14] The producer and DJ Preto C (Carlos Henrique da Silva) was even more emphatic in expounding this link between sampling and Hip Hop:

Michel: "You said you like to use samples. Why do you like this tool? [Why do] You like to work with..."

Preto C: "Because I think this is part of the Hip Hop history. I think this is being conservative with ideology. I think this is part of the history... since the beginning of Hip Hop, since the b-boy, since when they used to make loops with soul music [records]. When the DJ used to make a kind of back-to-back and the loop came back to the beginning of that part... I think the sample is part of the history. I've been researching a lot, this is part of the beatmaking art. [...] For me, the sample is actually a prime factor in my beat. I may use the other instruments but I won't stop using even a voice [from a sample]. Sometimes I may not use a melodic sample, I just use a voice. I may borrow that melody, maybe recalling it in a different way... but the sample, for me, is primordial in a beat. I think this is part of the culture, Hip Hop culture". [15]

The producer Enecê explains his understanding of the issue in a testimony about his initiation as a beatmaker. In the following passage, he goes from a narrative about his search for information until the discovery of the use of samples, and the importance of this procedure for the Hip Hop culture:

"I started to understand [the beatmaking process] by paying attention to the music, to the sample, [and] how the guys used to sample, the gringo guys... both the gringos and the Brazilian [beatmakers]. And I used to search a lot for samples, you know? I liked the sampling technics a lot since the beginning. I think the essence of the rap beat is the sample, and it will always be like that. I think that's something that's never gonna die. Maybe, today, I do not use as much samples [as I used to], but I think it still is the substance of rap music". [16]

The rapper and producer Clebin Quirino (Jefferson Cleber dos Santos Costa) brings up two different arguments to justify the choice of samples. He does not necessarily talk about "essence" or "foundation", but refers indirectly to Hip Hop culture, when it values the possibility of appropriation itself, and the logic of creation that lies on the reconfiguration of a preexisting musical material. He then argues that sampling enables a person who does not master any musical instrument to express himself musically, and this is a prime factor in his choice. He reports as follows:

"Michel: Why do you use samples? Is there any special reason for that?"

Clebin: "First of all, it's because I think that the possibility of borrowing music from the past, or music from the

current time, music that... brings you some memories, or some section of the song reminds you something pleasant... I think this is very cool. I think it's nice when you try to reshape a song that already exists, by turning a small sample of it into something else, which sometimes has to do with it and sometimes has nothing to do [with it]. So, that's the first reason. Another feature that makes me enjoy sampling is because I don't play any musical instrument. The only musical instrument I play is the turntable. Sometimes I try to make some melody, at the studio, but I'm not a musician that picks up an instrument and play along with someone who's singing. [...] the sampler gives me the possibility of not knowing how to play anything but to be able to use a sample with features that please me, and to make a song that I like". [17]

This section of the conversation with Clebin, regarding the use of samples, is unusual among the consultants who collaborated with the research. Although he mentions the question of appropriation, his justification does not clearly refer to a purported connection to the essence of Hip Hop. In addition, his second argument introduces another layer in the discussion. Although most beatmakers consulted demonstrate knowledge on the foundations of Hip Hop culture and rap music, what other elements influence their personal choices on tools and methods?

As previously stated, the beatmakers demonstrated a thorough understanding of the history and aesthetics of Hip Hop. However, this knowledge does not necessarily engender purist behavior (using the Schloss term) between them. The use (or not) of samples involves a relationship with the Hip Hop tradition, but other elements come into play when it comes to this choice. In this sense, local producers move between purist behavior and less traditional technical and aesthetic options in the context of Hip Hop. Producer Easy CDA (Hertz Bento), for instance, recognizes the centrality of sampling in Hip Hop but, at the same time, he claims that he prefers to create the melodies by playing it live at the keyboard. At the same time, he says he likes to work with samples and does not impose a restriction on himself in that sense:

"Michel: Do you still use samples? Did you use to use it more?

Easy CDA: Yes, I use it. But I use it less, because I come from this... I really like to create it. I like the sound of something created, I like... making my own arrangements, [I like] searching for my own sound at the track. I use virtual instruments, I use a conventional keyboard, synthesizers. Sometimes, when it's needed, I make something with samples. [...] something remarkable about my work is that you'll always listen to remarkable keyboard lines, something clean. I'll hear the keyboard and the bass together. It's quite this way. It's a feature from my beats. I'll listen to the synths... It's the keyboard stuff, it'll always have a keyboard or a synth, either a real or a digital one. Sometimes I also use live instrumentation. Sometimes I play the bass, sometimes I play the *cavaquinho* guitar [...]" [11]

Although Easy is characterized by the blatant use of timbres and arrangements of keyboards, it has several sample-based beats, both in older works and more recent productions. During our conversation, he argues that he does

not make frequent use of samples because he does not have time to devote himself to musical research of sample sources, which is a prime factor for this type of production. According to Easy:

"[...] because I like to use samples too, but there is something about it, that doesn't allow me using it frequently. As I work a lot, I work with a lot of people... so I don't have time to make it with samples, I don't have time to work as a traditional beatmaker, like... entering into the studio, locking the door, start digging in the crates, tracks... and sequencing, making a collection of samples and beats. I can't afford such a luxury. Because, for me, the traditional beatmaker is a real researcher. He, or she, is a researcher. You must have time, and it's a hard-working thing. Sometimes you make it and it doesn't work. That sample doesn't work and you must delete everything. You gotta have time to slice the samples. You gotta research for sounding, for creating your own beatmaker identity". [11]

What this passage of the conversation with Easy points out is the specific working method that production from samples imposes. Producing beats from samples involves: a constant search for sample sources; familiarity or interest in digital editing and manipulation tools; as well as a specific creation framework that is based on borrowing. Beatmakers that work with samples have a rationale, a workflow, which is based on the transformation of pre-existing material. Their creativity evolves within a supposed limitation, which involves dealing with sound and musical elements, or features present in the original track that they sample.

In this sense, the option to work with samples involves a personal positioning, on the part of the producer, as to which method of creation they feel most willing to express themselves. Some, like Easy CDA and DJ Spider, believe that they express themselves better, or they can be more creative, more productive, working with traditional tools, like live instrumentation. It is interesting to notice that working with more traditional musical concepts and tools, such as musical notes and live performance recording, departs somehow from the Hip Hop tradition, which from the beginning valued the appropriation and use of reproduction and programming equipment, to the detriment of instrumental performance.

5. CONCLUSION

What is observed is that, although the use of samples is not as blatant as in the classical period of style, the musical identity produced by sampling continues to be accessed by local producers. In this sense, beatmakers continue to use samples in their productions, but they are not limited to producing exclusively from samples (like some North American producers). There is a local trend to mixing samples with virtual synthesizers and live performance recording. While beatmakers recognize that sampling is linked to the essence of the genre, they feel the need to use other tools available in order to develop an artistic uniqueness that positions them in an authentic way in the local community of beatmakers.

The aesthetics of rap music is in constant transition, which is observable both in its sonority and in the processes of production. Hip Hop culture offers a context of philosophical and aesthetic creation and reference for this musical genre, but rap is no longer limited to the limits of this culture. And while Hip Hop embraces change and adaptation at its core, perhaps some of the developments that rap music presents are not confined to this tradition. Sampling is one of the ways in which rap agents in Belo Horizonte dialogue with this tradition. We observe that this procedure links them to this culture, but other options and personal and local elements are mixed in the processes of composition and musical production of rap. Such elements approximate traditional procedures in the production of popular music but distance themselves from the traditional production procedures of rap music.

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