



***Sampling, Biting, and the Postmodern Subversion of Hip Hop* by Jim Vernon.** London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021. 133 pp. ISBN: 3030749029.

Reviewed by Claire McLeish, Third Side Music

Sampling, Biting, and the Postmodern Subversion of Hip Hop came across my desk at an auspicious time for the culture. 2023 marked fifty years of hip-hop, specifically since Clive Campbell (better known as DJ Kool Herc) discovered the “break” at the first hip-hop party on 11 August 1973. One of the primary contributions of *Sampling and Biting* is an historiographical intervention about the culture’s earliest years. As a culture, hip-hop highly prizes innovation grounded in respect for its roots. Jim Vernon identifies a tension in this tendency: how could a genre known for its sampling—its reuse of previously recorded musical material— also hold a prohibition against “biting” (that is to say, stealing, or copying), when it comes to lyrics? To answer this question, Vernon digs deep into the ethical system that undergirded the culture in its earliest years. Providing examples from graffiti writing and breakdancing, Vernon calls attention to a nuanced system of values, prizing individual innovation for the advancement of the culture, with the ultimate goal of community uplift (Chapter 2). For example, graffiti writers had a code governing which kinds of art pieces could cover others: “a simple tag can be crossed out by a more refined throw-up, which in turn can be crossed out by a large and complex masterpiece, but only if the new works aesthetically best or ‘burn’ the covered one” (p. 12). This system of honour, originality, and respectful one-upmanship is a far cry from what Vernon calls the dominant “postmodern” view of hip-hop through the commercialized form of rap music: a “no fucks given” genre preoccupied with subversion, negation, and musical plundering of the past without regard to source or context (pp. 2-3).

Vernon’s book corrects some important errors in the historical record of hip-hop’s origins; he is particularly concerned with setting the record straight about the capitalist exploitation that resulted in the first recorded rap song, “Rapper’s Delight,” and its gritty “realist” counterpart, “The Message.” These commercial releases—both by Sugarhill Records—appropriated the original culture without respect for its internal ethical system, something that few historical sources recognize (Chapter 3). Indeed, Vernon identifies a systemic problem in the writing of hip-hop history:



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[R]ather than digging into the historical record to verify their accuracy, many journalists, academics, and cultural commentators often merely impose their own subjective presumptions regarding the culture's constituent community on Hip Hop; a practice that seems to proceed directly from reactionary postmodernism's rejection of the heuristic value of the very historical record against which such dominant presumptions can be tested. (pp. 30-31)

To take his metaphor a step further, hip-hop scholarship *itself* "samples" the culture, reproducing certain elements while ignoring the culture's values. Chapter 4 is devoted to exploring how one piece of postmodern hip-hop scholarship takes this tendency to an extreme: Vernon alleges that Justin Adams Burton's *Posthuman Rap* (2017) "presents Blackness as—and this is perhaps the key claim of his book— 'monstrous'" (p. 46).

While Vernon's criticism of postmodern hip-hop scholarship is valid and much needed, it leads to a terminological problem that weakens the book's overall claims. A side effect of his criticism of postmodern scholarship is a de-emphasis and dismissal of sampling. He writes, "sampling is not the central practice of Hip Hop; rather, this most postmodern of technologies was introduced into an already robust aesthetic culture" (p. 76, emphasis in the original). In other words, the use of pre-recorded material in early hip-hop was merely one element of "an aesthetically enveloping environment" that also included breakdancing and graffiti art, and later MCing (p. 15). For a scholar who is otherwise quite rigorous in this terminology (e.g., delineating rap music from the broader hip-hop culture), Vernon uses "sampling" quite loosely. Sampling more commonly refers to a specific creative practice that uses digital technology to cut, process, and re-assemble portions of pre-recorded music and sound; in terms of the technology it employs, sampling differs from turntablism—an umbrella term for the varied DJ techniques that manipulate existing recordings using turntables and a fader. Instead, Vernon uses "sampling" to refer to any taking without apparent regard for the material's source. In contrast, scholarship following Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of Signifyin(g) suggests that DJs carefully selected records based on who created them and what their sonic and cultural resonances with audiences—as part of a Black vernacular tradition of engaging with the past through repetition with a difference. Vernon himself quotes hip-hop DJ Afrika Bambaataa on ways he drew from eclectic repertoire to challenge his audiences:

I play stuff where people talk about I don't like Latin,' so I play a Latin artist, and get them movin.' I'm a play a rock artist, say "I ain't into heavy metal,' so I play something like Led Zeppelin or Foghat or something, then move into that" (p. 78).

Bambaataa was not mindlessly "sampling" without regard to the origins or connotations of the records he used: these were central elements in creating the "aesthetically enveloping environment." By de-emphasizing sampling and the sources of borrowed materials, Vernon inadvertently reinforces the postmodern scholarly perspective he professes to criticize; the book

would have greatly benefitted from engaging with the Black literary scholarship on Signifyin(g) regarding the meanings vested in re-used musical materials.

Sampling, Biting, and the Postmodern Subversion of Hip Hop features many quotations from artists who were active in hip-hop's early years. Vernon pays special attention to the voices of Grandmaster Caz, Afrika Bambaataa, KRS-One, and Rakim: re-centering the experiences and values of these artists is central to his aim of tempering the "nihilistic" slant of postmodern scholarship. However, his use of these first-hand testimonies—coupled with a penchant for fetishizing hip-hop's origins—demands a more nuanced consideration of authenticity. Vernon is engaged in what Allan Moore (via Paul Gilroy) would call "third person authenticity": "authenticity as primality... [a] tracing back to an original which validates the contemporary."¹ To be clear, discourses surrounding authenticity are nearly unavoidable in popular music studies: my concern is that Vernon engages in a sort of mythmaking without critical distance. While the artists he centres are important figures, Vernon makes assertions without tempering them with subsequent scholarship. For example, in Chapter 6, he credits the MC Rakim with creation of the sample-heavy collage texture that came to define hip-hop's "Golden Age"—an argument he does not support with any secondary sources, and one that I have never encountered before in my many years of research on sampling.² In exploring Afrika Bambaataa's "Infinity Lessons" (an ethical and spiritual guide for hip-hop artists from the perspective of the Universal Zulu Nation), Chapter 5 suffers from a much more grave omission: Vernon lauds Bambaataa's community organizing efforts without mentioning the well-known and credible accusations of child sexual abuse levelled against Bambaataa from former members of these very same groups.³ Vernon's privileging of accepted narratives about hip-hop's early years (albeit from outside of the postmodern vein) ironically leads to the same pitfalls he elsewhere condemns: personal perspectives on hip-hop's past are passed off as fact without acknowledgement (or awareness) of the full historical record. For a book so deeply concerned with the ethics of hip-hop culture this is a fatal flaw.

Vernon's book is best read as a whole: it would be possible to excerpt some chapters (especially Chapter 4 as a rejoinder to Burton's *Posthuman Rap*) but otherwise some key threads of his argument may be obscured. As will be clear from this review, *Sampling, Biting* assumes a high level of familiarity with both the common narratives of hip-hop history and extensive knowledge of its artists and repertoire. It also engages with broad issues of postmodernism and postmodern scholarship, and in this regard would be challenging for lower-level undergraduates. With this level of difficulty, the book would be better suited to upper-level undergraduate or graduate seminars about hip-hop or possibly on historiography, provided that the instructor is prepared to facilitate

¹ Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21 No. 2 (2002): 215.

² He does cite Robert Christgau's album review of *Paid in Full* but the review does not credit Rakim with creating beats. See 72 and 99n2.

³ For example, Paul Meara, "More Men Are Speaking Out on Afrika Bambaataa Sexual Assault Allegations," *BET.com*, October 11, 2016; Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Afrika Bambaataa sued for Alleged Child Sexual Abuse," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2021; and Andre Gee, "Afrika Bambaataa's Abuse Allegations Cast a Cloud Over The Universal Hip-Hop Museum," *Rolling Stone*, March 28, 2023.

discussions on the shortcomings mentioned above. While ambitious in its aim to reconcile hip-hop's differing approaches to the re-use of music and lyrics, *Sampling, Biting, and the Postmodern Subversion of Hip Hop* is held back by its imprecise use of the term "sampling" and its failure to engage with authenticity in the context of the culture's key figures and origins.