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Edutainment: Sampling Histories and Writing Music in the United States

This paper explores the use of recorded music to re-write social and musical histories in US soul and hip hop. The paper argues that the valuation of certain materials and technologies for inscribing cultural histories is inseparable, in the United States, from struggles by African American artists to contest official histories of nation and to undermine dominant regimes of cultural authority. It begins by examining the marketing of “race records” and “r&b” from the 1920s to the 1960s, with a focus on the use of record jackets and journalistic commentary to explain and “authenticate” black artists for (imagined) white audiences. It then looks at hip hop group Boogie Down Productions’ sampling of the Miracles, the Beatles and Stevie Wonder as both rewriting the musical histories of the “soul era” and rethinking the terms of cultural authenticity in the 1980s.